

# MEANING OF THE VIRTUAL YMCA

## The Meaning of the Virtual YMCA After School Program for Former Participants: An Exploratory Study

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### ABSTRACT

Research has shown that after school programs can provide children with opportunities that help foster positive development and adaptation. Current research meets the need for identifying short term outcomes, program standards, and short term evaluation techniques, however less understood is the lasting meaning of participation for previous participants after their participation. The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning and perceived impacts of participation in a preventative, skill-building after school program for former participants. Using an exploratory case study approach, interviews were conducted with six previous participants of the Virtual YMCA and a former school principal. Reconstructed narratives and analyzed transcripts show that participants do still derive meaning and significance from their participation in the program, although highly individualized. Significant aspects of the program are identified, as well as the participant's perceived impacts which are still present today. Discussion for practitioners, researchers, and funders is provided.

Keywords: Child Development, Marginalized, After School Programs, Community Recreation, Outcomes

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**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

*I pass by abandoned buildings, boarded up windows, overgrown yards strewn with litter, and dishevelled people pushing carts of belongings, as I pull up to the red brick elementary school building. I enter the almost empty school, an hour after the dismissal bell has rung, and turn left into the room of the Virtual YMCA program. The room is a welcoming environment, with pictures of smiling children posted on the walls, artwork hanging from the ceiling, desks arranged in an inclusive circle, stories lining the walls, carpets with books for reading, and the sound of laughter prevailing. Looking around, I see one staff member working with three children; they were huddled together and taking turns reading a story. The staff member helps the children sound out challenging words and smiles as they continue to read with one another. As my gaze continues around the room, I see another small group of children with a different staff member, looking into a microscope and trying to guess and describe what they are seeing below. They write their observations in notebooks, and share with one another their discoveries. I hear noise behind me, and turn to see another group of children coming down the hall towards the room. As they approach, I see that the staff member has in her hand a paper listed with different measurements and space where children could write down the items they found that matched that size. As they pass by, I ask the children what they have been doing. They eagerly held up their rulers in the air and one child exclaims with a beaming smile, “We’re measuring!!!”*

This excerpt describes an afternoon at the Virtual YMCA (VY) program, an after school program I have worked with closely in my role as the Director of Community

Outreach with the YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington/Brantford. This Virtual YMCA program was located at a school that had been identified by its school board as “high priority” due to the low academic achievement scores of its students; in 2009, the school ranked 2624<sup>th</sup> out of 2742 schools in Ontario for academic performance (Cowley, Easton, & Thomas, 2010). The school was also located in a neighbourhood that is considered high risk due to the high number of rental properties and transiency, above average poverty and unemployment rates, and limited social services for residents. Now in its tenth year at the school, the Virtual YMCA program had become somewhat of an institution in the school – a remarkable feat in the unstable world of after school programming, particularly in schools and neighbourhoods identified as high priority (Clutterbuck and Howarth, 2008).

Also remarkable was the impact the program seemed to be having on the children who participated in it. Indeed, the day I describe above was a fairly typical scene of children engaged in interesting, enriching activities with friends and supportive adults. In my new role I could see, and also heard, countless stories of the significance of the Virtual YMCA on the children who were participating in the program.

Yearly in-house evaluations showed the program was positively impacting participant’s academic skills. For example, 98.1% of children in all the VY programs in 2009/2010 had shown an improvement in reading by at least one grade level after a year in the program, with teachers also commenting on more positive attitudes towards homework, reading, and school. Survey results (from approximately 200 out of 240 participants) also showed increased social skills and friendships among participants in the VY, with 94 percent of children commenting that they have made friends at the Virtual

YMCA and 94 percent of parents indicating that the VY program has helped their child interact with others. Teacher surveys confirm that children in the program interact more positively with others, are able to solve problems more easily, are more cooperative, and are able to make new friends easier (YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington/ Brantford, 2010).

However, what I knew less about was the lasting impact this program was having after a child's year of participation and if this program could actually achieve goals of long term positive child development. Does the VY program make a long term difference? What aspects of the program were significant for participants years later? Further, what kind of meaning and significance do the students attribute to their involvement in the VY program, particularly in relation to their current academic, social, and personal development? This study aims to address these questions.

After school programs have existed for over a century, responding to the need for adult supervision, risk prevention, and skill building (McComb & Scott-Little, 2002). They have received increasing levels of attention in recent decades, particularly for the role they might play in high priority neighbourhoods. According to Halpern (1992), this growing interest has been driven by three main factors. The first is the concern surrounding the increased exposure of children to violence, deviance, drug use, sexual activity, and other anti-social behaviours during the hours of 3-6pm, and the need to provide all children with a safe and supervised setting during this high risk time. The second is a recognition of a "learning gap" between children of low income and their high-income counterparts (Sirin, 2005), and the potential for after school programming to offer additional academic support as a way to reduce that gap (Miller, 2003). The third factor is the conviction that all children, including children with little access to resources,



deserve the same opportunity to explore expressive arts, sports, and other developmentally enriching activities.

There is a wealth of current research on after school programs demonstrating that participation can influence the achievement of positive outcomes such as the development of life skills (WHO, 1999b), conflict resolution skills (Carlisi, 1996), and academic skills (Lauer et al, 2006); enhanced self-efficacy, competence, and leadership (Miller, 2003), self-awareness and confidence (Deerin, 2005), and developmental assets (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000); increased school engagement (Mahoney, 2000) as well as the ability to make healthy choices (WHO, 1999b), work with others (Pierce, 1999), complete homework (Johnson et al., 1999), and build positive relationships with adults (Rhodes, 2004). Research also notes that these outcomes have protective factors that can help a child overcome childhood trauma, stress, or obstacles and increase the likelihood of long term success in areas of academic performance (Miller, 2003). Participation in after school programs has also been associated with a decrease in negative behaviours including juvenile delinquency (Warren, Feist, & Nevarez, 2002), substance abuse (James & Wabaunsee, 1995), youth conflicts (Warren et al., 2002), school suspensions (Johnson, Zorn, Williams, & Smith, 1999), and school vandalism (Riley et al., 1994); as well as increased positive behaviours including emotional adjustment (Baker & Gribbons, 1998), better use of time (Johnson et al., 1999), higher educational aspirations (Huang et al., 2000), relationships with parents (Schwager, Garcia, Sifuentes, & Tushnet, 1997), and improved attitude towards school (Brooks, 1995). Research has also found positive associations between after school participation

and resiliency and later positive adult development (Benard, 1993; Leffert et al, 1998; Reed et al, 1995).

Researchers have also identified some important program elements that mediate the extent to which the successful outcomes will be achieved in after school programs. Miller (2003) summarizes these mediators and highlights the importance of such program characteristics as: staff who are well trained, knowledgeable, have high expectations and engage in positive relations with participants; low staff turnover and adult to youth ratios; programs with high quality program content; clear rules and expectations; engaging curricula that offers flexibility in learning styles; a program philosophy that values youth as resources who can influence the program activities; full time and sustained program administrators; a clear organizational mission and goals; on-going evaluation and assessments; adequate funding without the threat of loss; support of the school principal; involvement of parents; access to appropriate space and storage; and connections to community partners. Other researchers have found that lower achieving students benefit more than higher achieving students and students who attend more often are more likely to achieve greater benefits (McComb & Scott-Little, 2003).

However, gaps remain in our understanding of after school programs. Current research helps meet the need for exploration of outcomes, high quality program standards, and short term evaluation techniques, however less understood is the lasting meaning of participation for previous participants after their participation. As identified by Durlak and Weissberg (2007) in their report, "The Impact of After school Programs That Promote Personal and Social Skills," researching the long term benefits of after school programs "merit attention for future work" (p. 29) and is an important question

that needs answers. These answers will hopefully help inform funders who wish to invest in highly meaningful programs and assist practitioners with delivering effective after school programs.

However, studying long term impacts remains difficult due to transiency of neighbourhood residents and students, other intervening factors and programs in a child's life, constantly changing and unstable environments where risk factors are not static, and limited organizational resources for long term evaluation. Thus, studying long term impacts and following up with previous participants has remained a gap in the field of after school programs.

### **Study Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning and perceived impacts of participation in a preventative, skill-building after school program for former participants. For the purpose of this project, former participants referred to those who had been out of the program for at least one year. A program "impact" referred to the participant's subjective perception of how the program continued to influence their academic, recreation or social behaviour. The program's "meaning" referred to the significance that participants attributed to the program and how they saw the program as related to their personal, social, and academic development. In other words, perceived impact referred to "what" and significance to "how".

As mentioned previously, studying long term impacts of after participation is a challenge to researchers due to high transiency rates in the school and neighbourhoods, limited organizational resources, constantly changing factors in the children's lives, and the need for support from the school board or other community organizations (Burton,

1997). However, this research project had the unique opportunity to effectively manage some of these challenges by investigating the research questions in the context of one long-running after school program: the Virtual YMCA program at Worthington school (pseudonym), a school designated as “high priority” by its school board. This program was unique because the program was well established in that it had been operating for ten years and had hundreds of previous participants, it was run by an organization with a commitment to the highest quality programming, and there was a strong collaborative relationship between the organization and school principal and teachers.

The Virtual YMCA (VY) program was a holistic after school program that focuses on social, academic, recreation, and behavioural support. At the time of the study, the VY program operated in ten schools in and across Hamilton, Burlington, and Brantford. The schools where the program was offered were chosen in collaboration with the local school boards and were selected because the school was considered high priority due to low academic achievement scores or location in high risk neighbourhoods. The program was free to participants and their families and targeted children in grades one through five. The children, who had to be selected to attend, were referred to the program by their teachers for a variety of reasons including the absence of supervision at home after school, trouble completing their homework, low academic success, difficulty making friends, or having displayed behaviour in the classroom that limited their opportunities for involvement in other extra-curricular programs. The program accepted 40 students, who each attended the program three times a week over the course of the school year. The goals of the program were holistic and diverse, as they included improving not only literacy and numeracy skills, but also improving social skills,

developing self-confidence and self-efficacy, introducing students to new opportunities for success, and providing supportive role models (YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington/Brantford, 2010). Organizational commitment to supporting these goals was high. Staff-to-child ratios were 1:5, most of the staff members hired were in the process of completing a university degree in a related area, and programming was intentional and outcome-based.

This thesis presents the results of the exploration into long term meaning and significance of participation in after school programs. The questions guiding this research project included:

- Do former participants still derive significance and meaning from their participation in the Virtual YMCA?
- What aspects of the program were significant?
- What perceived impacts are still present one to two years after participation?

After a review of the relevant literature in Chapter Two, Chapter Three outlines the methodology followed for the study, which was an exploratory case study approach, with the case of interest as the Virtual YMCA program at Worthington School. The experiences of six former program participants and the former school principal were investigated using a phenomenological approach. Reconstructed narratives were created to represent the individual experiences of program participants. The transcripts and narratives were then interpreted using thematic analysis, with themes provided and a source for discussion. Chapter Three also outlines the various methodological challenges faced in conducting this study, and the ways that these challenges influenced the research process.

Chapter Four presents the data collected from the school principal and the former participants in two forms. First, data collected through participant interviews were transformed into story narratives that capture the principal and participants' stories, experience, and meaning of the Virtual YMCA. Then, the data that addresses the study research questions is presented.

Finally, Chapter Five discusses the significance of these findings for practitioners, researchers, and funders. The aim of this study was to open the discussion for whether after school programs can have meaning for participants one to two years after participation. For practitioners, Chapter Five considers the impact of the findings on such elements as program design and implementation, and what organizations who are currently delivering programs in the after school context can draw from this study. Chapter Five also considers the impact of these findings on future research, including direct extensions from this project as well as more general discussions around the challenge with conducting research with marginalized populations and areas requiring further investigation (such as most important program aspects, quantifying the significance of protective relationships, evaluating the emotional environment, and understanding how individual attributes such as race and ethnicity influence participation and meaning). For funders and policy makers, Chapter Five provides additional discussion for stakeholders to develop and promote policies that promote lasting meaning and significance.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **After school Programs as a Setting for Child and Youth Development: History and Current Context**

Several fields have responded to the compounding risk factors facing children and youth today. Traditional interventions saw children and youth as products to be “fixed” and often children were only referred to services after engaging in problematic or deviant behaviour. These traditional interventions have usually been provided in education, health, juvenile corrections, and community treatment centers. However, as funders, policy makers, and youth workers continue to recognize the importance of interventions to prevent problematic behaviour and promote positive youth development, attention has turned to out of school hours as a context to deliver programs, interventions, and resources for children and youth. This is for two reasons. First, after school programs can play a key role in accessing specific population of children and youth and providing them with appropriate developmental programs.

Second, after school programs have the potential to reduce the risks that emerge in the after school hours. Many emphasize these opportunities as important since unstructured afternoons, weekends, and early evenings can be particularly risky times for children and youth to engage in deviant behaviours. For example, unsupervised after school hours have been found to be the most common time for adolescent sexual intercourse (Zelnik & Kantner, 1977) and unsupervised youth are much more likely to participate in substance abuse (Dwyer et al., 1990, Richardson et al., 1993) and be subjected to negative peer pressure (Steinberg, 1986). Posner and Vandell (1999) followed a group third to fifth grade students who were of low income and found that

children who attended after school programs spent more time on enrichment and homework activities, more time actively involved with adults, and less time in unsupervised or low supervised care. These opportunities led to students achieving better grades, work habits, adjustment, relationships with peers, and improved conduct ratings by teachers.

Halpern (2002) traced the foundations of current after school programs to the early 1990's where societal concerns were forming for the safety and care for children who live in unsafe neighbourhoods and the need for childcare. Only recently, Halpern suggests, has after school programs been used to as a way to improve children's skills or achievement. Other researchers have suggested that these programs are required to prevent maladaptive behaviours by children (After school Corporation, 1999) and improve children's socialization (Fashola, 2002). According to Kugler (2001), three current societal concerns have led to the recent growth in after school programs: the lack of caregivers in the home after school; the belief that disadvantaged children can improve their skills if given the extra time; and, the high incidence in deviant behaviours after school.

Youth development programs have often targeted adolescents between the ages of 14 and 17. Interventions have been common in this age group because they have been identified as already exhibiting antisocial behaviours (and then referred to interventions) or are able to join programs under their own freedom (Silbereisen & Lerner, 2007; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). But from a much earlier age, individuals are subjected to stress and negative effects due to risk factors. For example, Canadian statistics show that half of all mental health disorders (i.e. depression, conduct disorder) are present before the age



of 14, with anxiety and impulse control appearing earlier (Alberta Mental Health Board, 2007). New research is showing that, while it is vital to promote resiliency across all age groups, young children as early as four can benefit especially from preventative programs and interventions that build resiliency skills (Alberta Mental Health Board, 2007).

Further research has shown that “not only do children need resiliency skills, but that introducing them at a young age is beneficial. By the age of eight, most children have already developed a style of thinking in response to stress” (Alberta Mental Health Board, 2007, p.4). This recognition on the importance of reaching younger children has also been a major factor in the development of after school programming.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings of After school Programs: Positive Psychology and Developmental Systems Theory**

After school programs have been formed based on different philosophical or theoretical underpinnings. Historically, the development of after school programs was driven by a concern to reduce the extent to which children and youth were engaging in socially deviant or negative behaviours such as crime, unemployment, and violence. Driving the philosophy of after school programming, and youth programming in general, was a concern that the deviant behaviours of youth were challenging current resources and the future viability of civil society (Dryfoos, 1998). Efforts to change these concerning trends came from a variety of different fields (medical, school, community, policing) with much focus placed on those most vulnerable for developing deviant behaviours, including children and youth. Deviant behaviours in children and youth often included areas of delinquency (Tolan & Guerra, 1994), violence (Howard & Jenson, 1999), alcohol and drug abuse (Jenson, 2004), school failure (Richman, Bowen, &

Woolley, 2004), and early or unwanted pregnancy (Franklin, Corcoran, & Harris, 2004). Participation in these behaviours was seen as having significant consequences, costs, and strains on society for the duration of the child's life, and the role of the after school program was to serve as an intervention to break the cycle of negative behaviour.

More recently, and in contrast to the traditional approach of viewing risk behaviour and intervention, a new, strength-based vision for helping children and youth has been gaining momentum. From this new perspective, problem behaviours are only one instance of outcomes that could occur during development and therefore, youth are not lost-causes, broken, in need of psychosocial repair, or problems to be managed (Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998). Instead, all children and youth are viewed as resources to be developed and some, due to their individual contexts, are further developed than others (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

This more positive outlook has been coined "positive youth development" (PYD) and builds on community psychology research from the early 1960's that critiqued the traditional medical model (which treats later stages of pathology) and encouraged primary prevention, which focuses on building strengths and competencies to prevent future problems (Trickett, Barone, & Buchanan, 1996). This outlook agrees that development is guided by more than one's genes, and that genes function within a larger complex context.

Underpinning positive psychology is developmental systems theory (DST). Historically, intervention models assumed that development was guided by one's genes and developmental outcomes are fixed. Therefore, interventions focused on fixing secondary problems, outcomes, and behaviours caused by one's genetic path. Competing

traditional models state the opposite: that genetic attributes are not as important as the context and environment that one is exposed to. Developmental systems theory emerged out of an attempt to dissolve these traditional models and the nature-nurture debate.

Oyama (1985) introduced an alternative model that integrates development, genetics, and evolution called the developmental systems theory (DST). Developmental systems theory is based on six core tenets (see Oyama, Griffiths, Gray, 2001; Robert, 2007):

1. Contextualism: the developmental context is important in the assembly, activation, and regulation of functional genes. Development outcomes are not genetically predetermined and potential emerges during development.
2. Nonpreformationism: developmental resources are not provided solely by genetics but are influenced, constructed, and selected by organisms throughout one's development.
3. Expanded pool of interactants: one's developmental system is made up of multiple interactants, rather than just developmental resources/factors and genetic types. All developmental resources must be considered in order to explain organismal development (i.e. DNA, mRNA, cells, hormones, enzymes, habitat, temperature, nutrition, social behaviour, social structure, sunlight, etc.)
4. Causal interactionism and dispersion: interactions comprising organismal development are complex, and effects are not simply additive. These interactions involve inducing, facilitating, maintaining, and participating in time-sensitive feedback loops at multiple levels within and beyond the developing organism.
5. Extended inheritance: there is more to inheritance than DNA, and reliably present elements of the developmental context are also inherited.

6. Evolutionary developmental systems: selection works on all levels of developmental systems and evolution should be defined as changes in the life cycles of organisms and tracked by differential reproduction and distribution of developmental systems.

Based on these tenets, genes are only one of the many inherited developmental resources and these resources cannot be classified into genetic or non-genetic. Causal arrows, therefore, must be drawn in multiple directions and development must be viewed from diverse combinations and perspectives (Robert, 2007).

Developmental systems theory supports and strengthens the efforts of preventative programs and show that despite one's genetics or developmental resources, further resources, experiences, and environments can be provided to encourage greater positive development and growth (Lerner, 2002). Research in comparative psychology and evolutionary developmental biology has demonstrated this potential for systematic change and individual plasticity during the course of development (Robert, 2007).

Furthermore, research in life span developmental psychology (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1998) and life course psychology (Elder, 1998) has shown the potential for optimizing individual development, change, and capacity by altering relations between individuals and their environments and capitalizing on life-span plasticity. According to Lerner et al., 2005:

These models of human development eschew the reduction of individual and social behaviour to fixed genetic influences and instead stress the relative plasticity of human development and argue that this potential for systematic change in behaviour exists as a consequence of mutually influential relationships between the developing person and his or her

biology, psychological characteristics, family, community, culture, physical and designed ecology, and historical niche. Adaptive developmental regulations emerge when these bidirectional interactions between individual and context advance the wellbeing of both components. (pp. 11-12)

*Risk and Protective Factors in Developmental Systems Theory*

Developmental systems theory draws attention to the interactions between the psychological, social, and biological characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the conditions in their family, community, and peer group (Germain, 1979) in child and youth development. In so doing, it places a focus on the *risks* and the *protective factors* that are present in the child's environment and the impact of these risks and protective factors on the way that development unfolds. Risks are described as events, conditions, or experiences that increase the likelihood, but do not ensure, that a problem will develop, continue, or worsen (Jenson & Fraser, 2006). Risks may occur as a single event or condition, or a cluster of conditions that may occur within the child, outside the child, or an interaction between the child and their environments. In the past two decades, studies have consistently found that there are specific risk factors that are linked to youth deviancy and deviant behaviours (Jenson & Fraser, 2006). Jenson and Fraser (2006) organized associated risk factors into three categories, environmental, interpersonal and social, and individual.

Environmental risk factors are related to those conditions that happen outside the child but influence the child's situation and development. These environmental risks include: laws and norms that are favourable to antisocial behaviour; poverty or economic

deprivation; low economic opportunity; neighbourhood disorganization; and, low neighbourhood attachment. Interpersonal and social risk factors are related to those events that happen within the social child and between the child and other people in his/her environment. These interpersonal and social risks include: family communication and conflict; poor parent-child bonding; poor family management practices; family alcohol and drug use; school failure; low commitment to school; rejection by conforming peer groups; and, association with antisocial peers. Individual risk factors occur within the child and are often related to genetic or biological influences. These individual risks include: family history of alcoholism; sensation-seeking orientation; poor impulse control; attention deficits; and, hyperactivity.

As mentioned above, these risks, either individually or combined, can increase the likelihood the child will later participate in deviant or negative behaviours. Currently, research remains surprisingly under-theorized and we do not yet know which risk factors are more pervasive or damaging, how many risk factors it takes to deem a child at-risk, or who is most responsible for the child being at risk (i.e. society, school, family) (McElwee, 2007). However, Dryfoos (1998) suggested there are several different levels or categories of risk, and calculations from his model place 10% of children at very high risk, 25% of children at high risk, and only 20% of children in the no-risk category.

Protective factors are individual traits or resources that can minimize or buffer the effects of risk factors, interrupt the cause and effect cycle, or block the effects of the risk altogether (Jenson & Fraser, 2006). Similar to risks, protective factors exist at the environmental, interpersonal and social, and individual levels. Environmental protective factors include such factors as children having opportunities for education, employment,

and other pro-social activities; caring relationships with adults or extended family members; and social support from non-family members. Interpersonal and social protective factors include attachment to parents, caring relationships with siblings, low parental conflict, high levels of commitment to school, involvement in conventional activities, and belief in pro-social norms and values. Individual protective factors include: social and problem solving skills; positive attitude; temperament; high intelligence; and, low childhood stress. Positive youth development, combined with developmental systems theory, shapes the way that practitioners view child and youth development and the way that it can be best supported.

As a theoretical framework, positive psychology and developmental systems theory give optimism to practitioners, researchers, and policy makers that programs and opportunities can reduce risks and promote protective factors among children and youth. According to Jenson and Fraser (2006), healthy adaptation, which is expressed through individual behaviour, “is interpreted as an interactive process involving the presence or absence, level of exposure, and the strength of the specific risk, protective, and promotive factors present in a person’s life” (p. 9). In applying Jenson and Fraser’s framework to child and youth programming, effective programs and interventions must consider the specific risks present and offer tailored protection to buffer the negative effects of those risks. Following this perspective, community organizations have been harnessed to help improve the development of children and youth, promote positive development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) and instill protective factors.

### **Theory-to-Practice Frameworks Shaping After school Programming and Related Empirical Outcome Research for After school Programs**

Although after school programs are theorized to play an important role in child and youth development, in order to develop effective programs, developmental systems theory needed to be translated into the practice of child and youth programming.

Currently, the field of youth programming has put into practice frameworks that theorize the role of after school programs in different ways, three of which will be reviewed here.

The life skills framework emphasizes after school programs as a setting to teach skills and knowledge that help promote healthy adaptation. In contrast, the developmental asset framework views after school programs as an external asset in the lives of youth, as well as a setting to promote the development of internal assets within youth. Finally, the adult support framework emphasizes the role of after school programs as a context for developing meaningful relationships with adults who can act as role models. These three frameworks are described below as well as research which supports after school programs' ability to achieve these outcomes for participants.

#### *Life Skills Framework*

According to the life skills framework, risks can be mediated and resiliency gained by providing children with opportunities to build specific skills that help them become resilient regardless of what stressors, or risks, are present in their life. Put simply, life skills enable children and adolescents to cope effectively with everyday challenges (World Health Organization, 1999). The WHO Department of Mental Health identified five basic areas of life skills that are essential for all children, regardless of culture or community. These five life skill areas are:



- Decision making and problem solving;
- Creative thinking and critical thinking;
- Communication and interpersonal skills;
- Self-awareness and empathy; and,
- Coping with emotions and coping with stress (World Health Organization, 1999b).

A large supporter of this concept is the World Health Organization (WHO), which has implemented life skill development programs worldwide for violence prevention (World Health Organization, 2009) and health promotion (World Health Organization, 1999b) with great success. Other researchers have been able to successfully apply the life skill concept in alcohol and drug prevention (Weichold, 2007) and school improvement (Skara & Sussman, 2003). Life skill training programs usually combine development of the skills listed above as well as education in the specific skills and knowledge related to the problem being addressed (i.e. health, violence, substance abuse).

The life skills framework can be altered depending on the community and specific challenges faced by groups of youth (World Health Organization, 1999). A recent report issued by the WHO (2009) has shown the diversity and flexibility of the life skills approach when working with children and youth. For example, life skills training has assisted children and youth in Zimbabwe and Thailand with the prevention of HIV/AIDS, prevented adolescent pregnancy in youth in Mexico, and increased positive socialization of children in South Africa and Columbia.

Many countries and communities are now looking to life skills training as a prospect to reduce the effects of risk and risky behaviours in children and youth through

reform of school systems, community recreation, and medical interventions. Life skills can further prepare children and youth by providing them with a foundation to meet the demand of today's job markets (World Health Organization, 1999). Ultimately, life skills training has been proposed by the WHO (2009) as having the potential to contribute to basic education, gender equality, democracy, good citizenship, child care and protection, quality and efficiency of the education system, the promotion of lifelong learning, quality of life, and the promotion of peace. Evidence collected by the WHO suggests that social development programs targeting young children do in fact prevent aggression, with greatest effects present for children at risk. Life skill programs that aim to reduce aggression and violence have been found in preschool enrichment programmes, social development programmes, academic enrichment programmes, and vocational training for underprivileged youth – with evidence for preschool and social programmes being the most robust (World Health Organization, 2009).

In addition to life skills, other researchers have identified the need for children to gain academic skills, especially literacy and numeracy skills. Being able to read and write is essential to success in nearly every other subject and reading during out of school time is closely linked to school success (Miller, 2003). In addition, high literacy skills has shown to go beyond good grades, and actually lead to higher education attainment, annual earnings, lower unemployment, and lower delinquency and crime (Miller, 2003). When reviewing resiliency in high risk youth, Werner (1993) also found that effective reading skills by grade four were one of the most potent predictors of successful adult adaptation. In addition, more than half the school failures detected at age ten were due to deficiencies in literacy levels. Children who fail to gain appropriate academic skills may become

alienated from school, act out aggressively, and engage in high risk and delinquent behaviours in adolescence (Miller, 2003).

Research on after school program outcomes have shown that participants are able to successfully achieve skill development through participation and that engagement in constructive activities can have a direct impact on life skill development. For example, effective after school youth programs have shown to help children improve reflective practices. This allows them to plan, make decisions, and problem-solve, leading to a child's ability to set and reach future goals (Miller, 2003). Programs can also develop skills in children so they are able to make healthy choices and develop healthy lifestyles (World Health Organization, 1999b). After school programs have also demonstrated their ability to promote creative and critical thinking in children and youth participating (Miller, 2003). After studying the effects of one after school program for at-risk children, Vandell and Pierce (1999) found that children gained the ability to work well with others and had better work habits in the classroom. In addition, these children were less likely to endorse relational aggression to resolve conflict and had improved conflict resolution skills. Other researchers (Carlisi, 1996; Posner & Vandell, 1994; Rodriguez et al., 1999; Warren et al., 2002), have also demonstrated that after school programs can promote and develop better conflict resolution skills in children and that life skill programs can teach anger control (World Health Organization, 1999b). Interpersonal and self-awareness skills also have potential to be developed, including increases in self-efficacy, competence, and leadership (Campbell et al., 1995; Fleming-McCormick & Tushnet, 1996; Heath & Soep, 1998; Miller, 2003). In addition, after school programs can provide a child with group membership and belonging to a group of peers with positive

aspirations and similar values. Since troubled adolescents often associate with other deviant youth, this group membership has been associated with an observed reduction in antisocial behaviours and an increase in school engagement (Mahoney, 2000). After school programs, such as the WINGS program (a program that aims to build social and emotional intelligence through after school programs), have also shown the ability to build confidence, self-esteem, impulse control, and cultivate self-awareness (Deerin, 2005). A meta-analysis of after school programs that sought to enhance social skills has also shown that after participation, children demonstrated significant increases in their self-perceptions and positive social behaviours (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010).

Several researchers have found that the support and social skill development provided by after school programs has led to better behaviour in school and the classroom environment (Baker & Gribbons, 1998; Johnson et al., 1999; Posner & Vandell, 1994). After school programs have also proven to be effective at increasing academic, literacy, and numeracy skills (Miller, 2003). In one meta-analysis of the effects of out of school programs for at-risk students, Lauer et al. (2006) reviewed 30 studies on literacy programs and 22 studies on numeracy programs. Based on these 52 rigorous research studies (they all used control and comparison groups), it was determined that after school program can have positive effects for academic skill development for students at risk and that students who participate in such programs are more likely to improve academic skills than those who do not.

Specific after school programs, such as Junior Achievement Worldwide, have also demonstrated the potential to build skills and increase student knowledge in the areas of business and economic principles, contributing to students' positive behaviours, attitudes,

and aspirations (Box, 2006). Other after school programs have shown skills improvement for students in areas of data analysis and writing (Miller, 2003), while others show general overall improvement in homework completion, understanding, or quality (Carlisi, 1996; Johnson et al., 1999).

*Developmental Assets Framework (Individual, Interpersonal/Social, and Environmental Protective Factors)*

The developmental assets framework is another model that has been applied extensively in child and youth programming. Similar to the life skills framework, the developmental assets framework focuses on ways to instill protective factors in children and youth by providing them with asset-building life experiences and opportunities. The concept of developmental assets was first introduced by Benson (1990) and is grounded largely in developmental systems theory. The developmental asset framework is based upon the notion that development occurs not only within the person, but that there is a dynamic interaction between the person and the context in which that person is embedded (Benson, 2007). Therefore, programs and interventions must engage both the child and the environment surrounding the child to provide various opportunities that build specific assets.

Compared to the life skills framework, the developmental asset framework takes a broader perspective on the factors that influence positive development. To determine what children and youth need to become productive, resilient, and positive people, an influential organization called the Search Institute surveyed thousands of youth to determine why some children succeed and others succumb to their risky environments. This work resulted in the identification of 40 variables, or assets, that were determined to

play a role in reducing high risk behaviour, enhancing thriving, and building resilience (Benson, 2007). Benson (2007) has further divided the 40 assets into 20 external assets and 20 internal assets. The external assets are relationships and opportunities that adults can offer young people. They are grouped into four categories: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. The internal assets are not simply present, but rather are gradually accumulated and expanded as a child grows and encounters numerous experiences (Benson, 2002). The four internal asset categories include: commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity. This framework was designed for children aged twelve to eighteen and has many practical applications, as well as an ability to inform theory. Each category is described below.

The external asset category of support covers a range of opportunities for experiencing affirmation, approval, and acceptance across multiple settings and includes relationships with people that are supportive, warm and encouraging (Benson, 2002). Benson identified family support, positive family communication, support from other adults, a caring neighbourhood, a caring school climate, and parent involvement in schooling as external supports that act as developmental assets.

The empowerment category focuses on the role that the broader community plays in encouraging children and youth to be involved in their environment because they are seen as valued and useful (Benson, 2002). Many of these assets are incorporated in Miller's (2003) summary of high quality after school programs. Assets in the empowerment category include a community that values youth, a community that gives youth useful roles, a community that gives youth opportunities to engage in community

service, and a community where children and youth feel safe at home, at school, and in the neighbourhood.

The boundary and expectation category addresses the importance of clear and consistent messages across multiple settings for expected behaviour, and the presence of adults and peers who value and model those pro-social behaviours (Benson, 2002).

Again, many of these assets (high expectations, positive peer influence, adult role model, aligning with school boundaries) overlap with Miller's (2003) program quality indicators.

Assets in the boundaries and expectations category include families, schools, and neighbourhoods maintaining clear rules and consequences for children and youth, adults as well as peers modeling responsible behaviour, and parents and teachers holding high expectations for children and youth.

The last external category, constructive use of time, focuses on the opportunities that are available to children and youth that connects them to caring adults and nurture their skills and capacities (Benson, 2002). After school programs can be a key facilitator in providing children and youth with opportunities for constructive use of time. Assets in the constructive use of time category include participation in creative activities, participation in youth programs like sports teams or clubs, involvement in a religious community, and time spent at home with family rather than hanging out with 'nothing to do.'

For internal developmental assets, the first category is commitment to learning and reinforces the need for children to have beliefs, attitudes, and skills that enhance academic success (Benson, 2002). Assets connected to commitment to learning include children having an achievement motivation, children being actively engaged in learning

at school, being bonded to the school, completing homework, and reading for pleasure. In the asset development framework, after school programs that facilitate, encourage, and reinforce positive beliefs towards learning and homework can help instill these assets.

The next category, positive values, represents six pro-social values and personal character that reflects universal societal values, all of which have a role in health promotion (Benson, 2002). The positive values in the developmental assets framework are caring, integrity, a sense of equality, honesty, responsibility, and restraint. These values overlap with some of the interpersonal skills that the life skills framework aims to develop, such as interpersonal skills, empathy, and coping skills.

The category of social competencies identifies the personal skills that one needs to navigate a complex society and generally refer to adaptive functioning (Benson, 2002). These skills include planning and decision making, interpersonal competence, cultural competence, resistance skills, and peaceful conflict resolution. Again, this category overlaps with the skills that are promoted in the life skills framework.

The last internal asset category, positive identity, is one's view of themselves in relation to their future. Assets related to positive identity include self-esteem, having a sense of personal power and a sense of purpose, and holding a positive view of the future (Benson, 2002). As with in skill development, after school programs are viewed as playing a role in helping children develop positive self-esteem and self-efficacy, and practice leadership and personal power.

The developmental assets framework has support within the child and youth development field because it has evidence of generalizability across social locations, contributes to a balance of the overall framework (i.e. individual and environmental), and



is seen as within the capacity of communities to affect their acquisition as well as within the capacity of youth to procure (Benson, 2007). Developmental assets have also been shown to have cumulative effects whereby the more assets a child acquires, the more likely they are to grow positively, despite risk factors in their life (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Conversely, the fewer assets a child has, the more likely they are to engage in risky or deviant behaviours. These concepts have been demonstrated extensively, even for children as young as ten (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006). Other researchers have used the developmental asset model to develop positive prevention and intervention frameworks to help students who are considered at-risk develop pro-social behaviours and academic success (Edwards et al., 2007). The developmental assets framework provides a strong model for understanding the opportunities and experiences children and youth need to grow into positive, pro-social adolescents.

As Benson (2002) explained, assets need to be influenced from many resources (family, school, peers) and after school programs can play a key role in providing children and youth with opportunities to gain many of these developmental assets. After school programs also have the potential to serve as a bridge or link to other resources in the community, such as neighbourhoods, families, and schools. After studying thriving behaviours in 6,000 adolescents, Scales, Benson, Leffert, and Blyth (2000) found that certain assets have a greater impact and can significantly contribute to more than one positive outcome (7 outcomes or thriving behaviours include: school success, leadership, valuing diversity, physical health, helping others, delay of gratification, and overcoming adversity). The most pervasive positive asset was “time in youth programs”, which was a meaningful predictor of five of the seven thriving outcomes. The researchers attribute this

to youth programs being able to have access to caring adults, responsible peers, skill building activities, and reinforcement of academic and health values. Other important assets include: cultural competence; personal power and self-esteem; achievement motivation; and, planning and decision making. Encouraging for youth programs, these “important assets” can be instilled and fostered through community after school programs. Unfortunately, there are few documented research accounts of specific after school programs designed and implemented to intentionally increase the number of assets in children and youth.

#### *Adult Support Framework*

The adult support framework has developed out of research that, in an attempt to narrow down the ‘critical ingredient’ of after school programs, emphasizes the importance of after school programs as a setting for youth to form meaningful relationships with adults (Rhodes, 2004). Research has demonstrated that adult support, even from non-familial adults, can act as a key protective factor for children and youth at risk. These relationships can help youth form caring and supportive bonds that encourage motivation, higher expectations, help with problems, and mentoring (Kahne et al., 2001). These relationships have been shown to be an important protective factor for positive development as they help youth avoid risky behaviours, pursue desirable opportunities, and recover from negative experiences (Furstenberg, 1993; Tierney & Grossman, & Resch, 1995; Werner, 1993). For example, a trusting relationship with a mentor has been found to assist youth in acquiring and refining thinking skills; further, research has made consistent positive associations between youth-adult relationships and academic achievement, competence, and motivation (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Reddy, Rhodes, &

Mulhall, 2003; Roeser & Eccles, 1998). Research has also shown that at-risk youth have limited access to positive role models and believe that their opportunity for success and positive behaviour is restricted (Blechman, 1992). In studying children who were able to develop resiliency despite risk, Werner (1993) found that these adults did not have to be a parent, but rather were often grandparents, youth leaders, and members of church groups who were able to foster trust and act as gatekeepers for the future. Most of all, Werner (1993) found that these adult relationships promoted self-esteem and self-efficacy through unconditional acceptance and that the resilient youth were able to feel special to another person. In comparison to the developmental assets framework, adult support is a much more focused framework however it is similar to the external asset category of support. In terms of translating this framework to practice, most promising for youth development programs is that youth workers in community programs can provide this protective factor, even when parents are incapacitated or unavailable.

Research on after school programs has widely documented the unique potential for adult relationships to form and ability for these relationships to enhance program success and goals. As Rhodes (2004) suggested, after school programs can provide a fertile environment for strong ties to develop with staff members. These ties may be even stronger than those with teachers since program staff members are often faced with less demands and unique opportunities for informal conversations and participation in enjoyable activities. Research reveals that, contrary to beliefs of strong student-teacher relationships, teachers are often constrained by busy schedules and managing their role as evaluators (Pianta, 1999). In addition, working parents are also stretched by family and

job demands and rarely have downtime to engage in enjoyable conversations and activities with their children during afternoon hours (Rhodes, 2004).

Since after school program staff members have the ability to stand outside these roles, they can provide a safe context for support and guidance to deliver pro-social values, advice, and attitudes (Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). Also, since program leaders are often young adults from the community, they are well positioned to connect with participants (Hirsch, Mickus, & Boerger, 2002). After school program leaders also have the flexibility to take on different roles, such as emotional support, tutoring and academic support, and links to other community resources, including the child's school (Rhodes, 2004).

However, exposure to program staff does not guarantee relationship ties or close bonds will form. Program characteristics, such as ratios, staff turnover, shift timing, and job demands, might restrict the quality of relationships that can be formed (Rhodes, 2004). Despite these challenges, adult support and relationships have a wide range of developmental benefits that can be harnessed in after school program environments.

In addition to the above direct relationship benefits, research on after school programs has also shown that adult support can enhance the program's abilities to achieve goals and skill development. Since after school programs focus on more than classroom learning, staff can be key adult role models for life skills, lessons, attitudes, and behaviours (Hirsch, Roffman, Deutsch, Flynn, & Pagano, 2000). Other researchers have found that program staff support can be a major force motivating youth to participate in the program activities (Gambone & Arbreton, 1997). Staff also are the main influence for the delivery of the program and setting up the social and learning

environment for the children (Grossman, et al., 2002). Grossman et al. (2002) further describes this staff influence:

Staff practices and behaviours are the critical ingredient. Staff in high-quality activities set up physically and emotionally safe environments in which they heighten and sustain the youths' interest, making the activity challenging, as well as promoting learning and self-discovery in multiple areas (academic, social, personal). (p. iv)

Rhodes (2004) provides a conceptual model outlining that staff contribute to outcomes of after school programs in three ways: by enhancing youths' social skills and emotional well-being; by improving cognitive skills through instruction and conversation; and, by serving as role models and advocates.

Going beyond explaining the uniqueness and benefits of after school staff relationships, other researchers have begun to examine the ways to enhance and ensure quality relationships can form. For example, Seligson and MacPhee (2004) provide research informing the selection, training, and professional development of staff working in after school programs. In addition, Deutsch and Spencer (2009) examined ways to assess the quality of youth mentoring relationships. After reviewing previous research, they determined that quality relationship indicators include: relationship duration, frequency of contact, quality of the connection that forms, and the mentor's approach to the relationship.

### **Potential for Program Frameworks to Promote Lasting Positive Development: A Cursory Review**

In all of the frameworks presented above, after school programs are theorized as contexts for the development of the skills, assets, or adult relationships that help children and youth gain the protective factors they need to overcome risk. Although the theorizing on after school programming and short term outcomes is extensive, empirical investigations that focus on the impact of after school participation to achieve lasting meaning and influence positive development are limited. Despite these gaps and limitations, research has linked the use of the above theoretical frameworks and related outcomes to long-term positive development, especially for the areas of academic performance, involvement in pro-social behaviours, and resiliency into adulthood.

#### *Increased Academic Performance*

Research on the effects of youth development programs has supported the notion that program involvement has positive effects on overall academic performance. After reviewing hundreds of after school, academic programs, Miller (2003) noted that by increasing school engagement through skill-based programs, children can achieve valuable attitudinal and behavioural changes including increased motivation, higher attendance rates, better work habits, increased cognitive skills, and better classroom behaviour, therefore increasing their overall academic performance. These behavioural and attitudinal changes have been shown to lead to improved grades (Baker & Witt, 1996; Brooks, 1995; Cardenas, 1992; Carlisi, 1996; Hamilton, Le & Klein, 1999), higher scores on achievement tests (Hamilton et al., 1999; Huang, 2001; Huang et al., 2000; Johnson et al., 1999), and decreased dropout rates (Jones & Offord, 1989).

Extensive research has been conducted on the developmental assets framework, and outcomes of academic success. For example one study found that developmental assets contributed to school success (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000) with the achievement motivation and school engagement assets as the greatest contributors. Over and above demographic variables, the developmental assets explained from 19% to 31% of the variance in school success, with higher proportions of variance explained among White, Asian American, and Multiracial youth (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). In another study, it was found that asset-rich youth were much more likely to succeed in school and have significantly higher grade point averages (53%) compared to asset-poor youth (7%) (Scales, 1999).

In a more recent article, Scales et al. (2006) followed 370 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> graders for three years in order to investigate the relationship between developmental assets and academic achievement over time. Results found a significant positive relationship between the number of assets a youth had at the start and, the GPA they had three years later. In addition, students who were able to maintain or increase their number of assets had significantly higher GPAs than students whose assets decreased. Scales et al. (2006) also determined that specific clusters of assets significantly increased the likelihood of students achieving a B+ or greater average. These clusters included assets related to connection to community and norms of responsibility. For every point higher in either of these categories in 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade, youth were two to three times more likely to be in the high GPA group three years later (Scales et al., 2006).

However, the literature also suggests that the specific design of the program plays a role in affecting the extent to which academic outcomes are achieved. For example,

Miller (2003) suggested three promising practices for youth development programs to ensure the greatest likelihood of improving academic achievement. The first practice is to provide time for assisted homework completion in order to “level the playing field” and ensure at-risk students have access to supplies, space, and support that they may not have otherwise. It also recommended that youth development programs do not solely focus on homework, but rather homework activities are interwoven into other activities, providing children with a break and snack immediately after school dismisses. The second practice is to link the after school program to the child’s school in order to ensure teacher collaboration, communication, and consistent expectations. It is cautioned that the program should not model the school day, but still provide flexibility for individual growth, personal identity, and a space that is different from a classroom. The third practice is to focus on literacy development and encourage reading for pleasure.

Programs can promote literacy improvement through trained staff, homework/study time, board games (Scrabble, Boggle), independent reading times, book discussions, and creative use of technology and the arts.

#### *Participation in Positive Behaviour and Resistance to Negative*

The interest in understanding the relationship between after school program participation and participation in negative behaviours has been high. In general, participation in youth development programs has been linked to significant reductions in juvenile delinquency (Jones & Offord, 1989; Schinke, Orlandi, & Cole, 1992; Warren, Feist, & Nevarez, 2002), substance abuse (James & Wabaunsee, 1995; Jones & Offord, 1989; Richardson et al., 1993, Schinke et al., 1992), conflicts between youth (Riley et al.,



1994; Warren et al., 2002), school suspensions (Johnson et al., 1999), and school vandalism (Riley et al., 1994).

Life skill programs have been associated with decreased violence by providing children with the cognitive, emotional, and social skills they need to resolve conflicts and deal with everyday life (World Health Organization, 2009). In addition, evidence collected by the WHO suggests that social development programs targeting young children can actually prevent aggression, with greatest effects present for children at risk. Life skill programs that aim to reduce aggression and violence have been found in preschool enrichment programmes, social development programmes, academic enrichment programmes, and vocational training for underprivileged youth with evidence for preschool and social programmes being the most robust (World Health Organization, 2009).

Developmental assets have also been positively correlated to decreased negative behaviours in children and youth. In an large-scale study, Leffert et al. (1998) sampled 99,462 diverse youths in grades six through twelve to measure their number of assets and recent participation in negative behaviours. Table 1 shows comparison rates for youth with low and high assets and the percentage of that population participating in negative behaviour. It is clear that those with a high number of assets participate significantly less in negative, unhealthy, or anti-social behaviours.

Conversely, the presence of developmental assets has also been positively associated with increased positive behaviour in children and youth. For example, Scales et al. (2000) have shown that developmental assets significantly impact the likelihood

that youth will participate in leadership behaviours, help others, be physically healthy, delay gratification, and value diversity.

Table 1

*Participation in Negative Behaviour and Assets*

<b>Negative Behaviour</b>	<b>Youth with 0-10 assets</b>	<b>Youth with 31-40 assets</b>
Alcohol Use (has used alcohol three or more times in the past month or got drunk once or more in the past two weeks)	53%	3%
Tobacco (smokes one or more cigarettes every day or uses chewing tobacco frequently)	45%	1%
Illicit Drug Use (used illicit drugs three or more times in the past year)	42%	1%
Sexual Intercourse (has had sexual intercourse three or more times)	33%	3%
Depression-Suicide (is frequently depressed or has attempted suicide)	40%	4%
Antisocial Behaviour (has been involved in three or more incidents of shoplifting, trouble with police, or vandalism in the past year)	52%	1%
Violence (has had three or more acts of fighting, hitting, injuring a person, carrying/using a weapon, or threatening physical harm in the past year)	61%	6%
School Problems (has skipped school two or more days in the past month or has a below C average)	43%	2%
Driving and Alcohol (has driven after drinking or drove with someone who was drinking three or more times in the past year)	42%	4%
Gambling (has gambled three or more times in the past year)	34%	6%

In addition to skill development and developmental assets, researchers investigating the impact of “adult support” have found that program staff often can be strong role models and influence youth’s decisions by exemplifying desired behaviour (Rhodes, 2004). Research has shown that at-risk youth have limited access to positive role models

and believe that their opportunity for success and positive behaviour is restricted (Blechman, 1992). After school staff can therefore, provide concrete models of success and demonstrate more pro-social behaviours (such as conflict resolution and resistance) that youth can emulate. Program staff can also provide support, encouragement, and feedback to youth and help them select more positive peer groups who can gradually influence choices made (Rhodes, 2004).

Along with decreasing negative behaviour, youth development programs have been identified as playing a role in fostering the positive behaviours that act as protective factors for children and youth. For example, youth development programs encourage better emotional adjustment (Baker & Gribbons, 1998; Kahne et al., 2001; Marshall et al., 1997), better use of time (Johnson et al., 1999; Posner & Vandell, 1994), fewer absences from school (Huang, Gribbons, Kim, Lee, & Baker, 2000; Johnson et al., 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 2003; Vandell & Pierce, 1999), higher educational aspirations (Brooks, 1995; Heath & Soep, 1998; Huang et al., 2000; Rodriguez et al., 1999; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998), improved relationships with parents (Schwager, Garcia, Sifuentes, & Tushnet, 1997), greater feeling of belonging (Schwager et al., 1997; Warren et al., 2002), and improved attitude towards school (Brooks, 1995; Huang et al., 2000).

#### *Resiliency and Positive Adult Development*

The most powerful of all long term outcomes is the role of youth development programs in fostering resiliency and positive development into adulthood. Resiliency is ultimately one's ability to bounce back from and overcome developmental risks, daily adversity, and future stressors. Werner and Smith (1982) describe resiliency as a child's

“capacity to cope effectively with the internal stresses of their vulnerabilities” (p. 4). So despite the many stressors or risks that may be exposed to a child, if the child survives and prospers, they may be said to be resilient.

Despite numerous definitions to describe resiliency, the concept remains the same. Commonalities between all definitions of resiliency include the ability to cope well, opportunities for growth, beating the odds, and inoculation against future stress (McElwee, 2007). Everyone has some level of resiliency to deal with stressors in their life. However, there are two types of resiliency that one may have. “Healthy” resilience is expressed through pro-social, adaptive, and compassionate behaviours. “Unhealthy” resilience is expressed through violence, withdrawing, deviance and self-destructive behaviours (McElwee, 2007). Ideally, programs and interventions help children steer toward a healthy resiliency so that they are able to overcome challenges and continue developing in a positive, meaningful, and consistent way (McElwee, 2007).

Research into the factors that foster healthy resilience among children and youth is extensive, and has produced some useful results. For example, Reed et al. (1995) also found that a strong factor influencing resiliency in youth was positive use of time. Benard (1993) found that youth who were resilient shared four specific qualities. These were: social competence, problem solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose.

Adult support can also foster youth resiliency. For example, Reed et al. (1995) studied factors that influence the development of resiliency in middle school students and found consistent themes of significant adult relationships that were able to provide encouragement and high expectations. Werner (1993) also points to the importance of adult relationships in resiliency development. When studying high risk children who were

still able to be resilient, all had at least one person in their lives who accepted them unconditionally and who could promote self-esteem and self-efficacy. Hartup (1993) also found that the ability to get along with peers was the best early predictor of adult adaptation, not IQ, school grades, or classroom behaviour, and adult support can be a key influence in providing a safe environment to build and practice relational skills.

It must be noted that although the research on after school program outcomes tends to be conducted from one of these three frameworks, there is overlap and connection between all three. For example, skill development cannot occur in isolation and must be supported and enhanced through appropriate adult support and meaningful life experiences. Similarly, life experiences and opportunities for asset development cannot be provided if adults are not present to encourage and reinforce the development of specific life and academic skills. Adult support can also act as a strong motivator for encouraging both participation in new opportunities and asset experiences, and developing new skills. Although all three of these factors can act as protection from risk in and of itself, if programs can provide all three, greater connections to long term outcomes can be facilitated.

### **Evaluating After School Program Outcomes**

While after school programs continue to be promoted as contexts that influence the positive development of children and youth, it is also well known that after school programs vary dramatically and further, the research that has been conducted on them is not conducted in a way that allows the results to be compared to other programs. One of the factors limiting research has been the large variation in the types of programs being

offered, goals, and participation. Unfortunately, with such variety, assessing effectiveness or developing overarching evaluation tools or standards is difficult (Lauer et al., 2006).

The wide variety of after school programs have also led to difficulty developing standards or characteristics of effective programs. However, some researchers have noted that some programs are more effective than others. Cooper et al. (2000), when reviewing summer academic programs, noted that programs were more meaningful when: low to middle income students were participating; there was a smaller number of students with individualized or small-group instruction; and, participants were from lower elementary grades. Expanding on these conditions, other researchers have found that lower achieving students benefit more than higher achieving students and students who attend more frequently benefit more than lower attending students (McComb & Scott-Little, 2003). Based on research literature Lauer et al. (2006) concludes that there are possible moderators for effectiveness based on a program's timeframe, grade level, program focus, program duration, and student grouping.

However, others have critiqued the rationale for after school programs and note that these programs do not always achieve potential benefits or are of high quality leading to: weak academic achievement connections, low transferability of skills developed, not fully engaging youth capacities, and absent meaningful relationships with adults (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; Halpern, 1992; Kahne & McLaughlin, 1998). Therefore, in order for benefits to be gained, after school programs need to go beyond being purely recreational or social, have appropriate and trained staff, have adequate facilities, and teach more skills than simple academic remediation (Miller, 2003). Miller (2003) stresses that programs must engage students in active learning

experiences and emphasize developing children and youth's personal commitment to learning and development through intentional, high quality programs with positive, trained, and pre-screened staff.

In an attempt to synthesize some of this work, Scott-Little, Hamann, and Jurs (2002) conducted a meta-analysis of after school evaluation studies. In total, they reviewed 23 documents or articles that attempted to evaluate similar after school programs. The meta-analysis produced a number of findings. The first was that there was a lot of variability in the types of evaluations being conducted to assess the after school programs. Of the 23 evaluations, twelve were summative and aimed to provide data on the impact of the program, four were formative evaluations that provided early data on the program, and seven were implementation evaluations that examined how the program was operating. Some studies used one form of evaluation, whereas others used two kinds of evaluations (i.e. both implementation and outcomes). Some of the evaluations were conducted internally, while others were conducted by external observers. Funding for the evaluations was also diverse, with funding being provided by government agencies, foundations, universities, or the program itself. Sample sizes and number of sites evaluated varied based on the program being studied, and the data sources ranged from one to six (i.e. students, parents, staff, non program staff, community members, and program documentation). Some evaluations used direct observation of the program, while others looked at just the implementation characteristics of the program. There was also a wide range in the types of evaluations being used, including surveys, cognitive measures, affective measures, document reviews, group interviews, observations, individual interviews, demonstration of skills, and self-reports.

In the end, the researchers concluded that evaluation in this field is emerging and that programs are using a wide variety of evaluations. The variability leads to difficulty comparing evaluations and evaluation outcomes and Scott-Little et al. (2002) suggested more scientifically based evaluations utilizing more standardized measures. Ultimately, they concluded that the following issues need to be addressed in order to more effectively evaluate after school programs:

- Additional evaluations and for those evaluations to be disseminated
- After school evaluations need to address Program Evaluation Standards
- Evaluations need to apply proven evaluation designs and methodologies
- There is a need for better measures
- Controls for students who drop out or leave the program
- Evaluations should address program composition and quality, not just outcomes
- Evaluation results need to be reported appropriately
- There is a need for longitudinal data

Despite challenges for evaluation, the review of research suggests that many after school programs have demonstrated effectiveness and benefits gained for participants. After school programs have also shown the potential to act as a vehicle to deliver specific protective factors for children and youth to overcome risks. For example, after school programs have been shown to effectively increase behavioural, social, and life skills, provide children with required life experiences and developmental assets, and provide children with adult support (Miller, 2003). In addition, after school programs may be particularly beneficial for low-income children as they are: at greater risk for academic failure and can benefit from additional supports (Borman & D'Agostino, 1996; Cooper et



al., 2000) less likely to have a caregiver home after school (Lauer et al., 2006), and are more likely to gain benefits from after school opportunities (Cosden, Morrison, Albanese, & Macias, 2001; Miller, 2003).

Researchers need to continue to document program implementation and outcomes while taking into account previous research evaluations. With decreases in funding and scarcity in community resources, after school programs must continue to demonstrate proven program models, especially those programs that go beyond mere recreation and diversion to build skills and provide developmental opportunities, life experiences, and adult support. There is also a need to determine if there are lasting impacts for children years later after they have participated in effective after school programs. This thesis aims to contribute to this research gap.

### **Critique of Positive Youth Development**

In its most simplified concept, youth development is a natural process that is attuned to basic needs and stages and there is a need for individuals and agencies to nurture this growth process for adolescents at the community level. Hamilton and Hamilton (2004) state that the fundamental principle of the youth development approach is to positively build on strengths for all youth. A wealth of evidence and knowledge points to the apparent success of this perspective and is well documented within schools, community centres, and youth organizations. There has also been a documented shift towards youth empowerment models, comprehensive community programs, and integrating community programs into social institutions (Yoshikawa & Shin, 2008).

However, there are some who critique this research and challenge the notion that youth development can achieve all it claims to. As noted by Sukarieh and Tannock

(2011), despite this “positive youth development for all” paradigm, there is still a preoccupation with youth “at-risk”. This population is still often the target of programs, continuing to racialize and categorize these youth. In addition, through the mere act of emphasizing the potentials and strength of young people, practitioners continue to highlight deficiencies in skills, attitudes, and behaviours for youth. Coussee et al. (2009) thus argue that “the underlying assumption of this seemingly positive and preventative paradigm indicate and reaffirm a view of development of vulnerable youth as lacking, deviant, and pathological” (p. 425).

Sukarieh and Tannock (2011) also criticized that, despite an emphasis on paying attention to diverse developmental contexts, many youth development frameworks are quite narrowly defined. These youth development frameworks often see concepts of “socialized”, “productive”, and “competent” as easily measurable and unproblematic. However, these concepts are often controversial and depend highly on varying political and social definitions and constructs. This practice leads to a dominant, stereotypical, and mainstream view of positive development shaping what youth “should be”.

Consequently, researchers and practitioners in this field often fail to consider or provide a critical perspective on the powerful social forces and structural conditions which shape and influence youth development. In the light of positive youth development, unpleasant issues of poverty, unemployment, inequality, and other social programs can be easily ignored. In response, Lesko (2001) highlighted that positive youth development concepts should be regarded with cautiousness until researchers begin to address political and education systems that continue to create structural challenges that impede positive youth development.

Another criticism is that positive youth development has been over promised and the term itself is now ambiguous and confusing. According to Benson and Pittman (2001) positive youth development is a wide ranging term that “simultaneously denotes a call to action, a mobilization of people and places, a body of knowledge, a set of organizations, a philosophy, and a life stage” (p. 3). Sukarieh and Tannock (2011) further describes how the term youth, which once was used to reference pool, working class, and visible minority youth, often is used to refer to many individuals, including pre-teens, teens, and those in early adulthood from all economic and ethnoracial backgrounds. This term spans from childhood to adulthood and can be used to encompass life stages, attributes, or development throughout – to the benefit of the researcher or group. This youth category is double sided, encompassing both negative and positive characteristics and stereotypes.

Despite these critiques, positive youth development remains to be a pervasive concept that continues to transcend disciplines and seems to be something that everyone can feel good about. We must then, as we move forward, attempt not to just simply replace negative views of youth with positive views of youth, but to further understand how these views of youth interact with social and economic contexts and to better understand the conditions influencing this broad category of identity (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2011).

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

#### Research Framework

This study explored the lasting meaning and perceived impacts of participation in the Virtual YMCA for former participants. The research questions guiding this study were:

- Do former participants still derive significance and meaning from their participation in the Virtual YMCA?
- What aspects of the program were significant?
- What perceived impacts are still present one to two years after participation?

An exploratory case study approach was used for this study, with the principles of phenomenology guiding the data collection. Reconstructed narratives were created to represent the individual experiences of program participants. The transcripts and narratives were then interpreted using thematic analysis, with themes provided and a source for discussion for practitioners, researchers, and funders. In this chapter, I explain this methodology as well as explain and discuss the issues that arose during the research process.

#### *Case Study Methodology*

Case studies are, in part, both an object of study (Stake, 1995) and a methodology (Merriam, 1998). Creswell (1998) described a case study as “an exploration of a ‘bounded system’ or a case... over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (p. 61). A case, therefore, is bounded by a time and place and may include a single or several programs, events, activities, or individuals. Observations, interviews, audio-visual material, documents, and

reports may be used in combination of one another to collect information and data. For the purpose of this study, the Virtual YMCA program was the case under investigation. The main emphasis of the study was to investigate the program's lasting meaning through interviews with previous participants, school administration, and school documents. As described by Tellis (1997), the case study approach is an ideal method for research questions requiring a holistic, in-depth investigation. This method is also considered a prominent method in the social sciences, especially relating to issues about education (Gulsecen & Kubat, 2006), sociology, and community based problems (Tellis, 1997).

Yin (1993) noted three types of case studies: exploratory, explanatory (looking for causal relationships), and descriptive (which starts from a solid theory or understanding). Exploratory case studies are most useful when limited data or theories related to the topic exists (Yin, 1993) and, given the current gap in literature, seemed appropriate for this study. In exploratory case studies, data collection is often undertaken prior to the final definition of research questions and hypotheses. The framework for the study is created ahead of time, however interview questions, methods, and questions may change depending on the outcome of data collection efforts or pilot studies (Tellis, 1997). As further described by Tellis (1997), this type of research has been considered as a prelude to further social research. Stake (1995) recommended that for exploratory case studies, researchers should select cases that are easy to access and where willing subjects can be found in order to maximize what can be learned in a limited amount of time. Given my connection and access to the Virtual YMCA program, this setting proved to be an ideal case to begin to explore lasting meaning and significance.

Emerging from exploratory research is a detailed description of the case, collective themes or issues, and the researcher's interpretations and assertions made from the description and themes (Creswell, 1998). As described by Jasper (1994), this data can "be used to guide wider and larger scale studies from an informed starting point" (p. 313).

### *Principles of Phenomenology*

Principles of phenomenology also informed and helped guide the research process. Phenomenology aims to explore the nature and meaning of a social phenomenon as they are experienced by a person, and seemed appropriate for this project due to the study's focus on exploring individual meaning and significance related to program participation. Phenomenology was first described by Immanuel Kant in 1764 as a reaction to the reductionist approach in science. Instead of exploring factors in isolation or abstractly, like traditional scientific methods, this approach aimed to study 'phenomena' or 'things' (Cohen, 1987). Husserl expanded on phenomenological methods in the early 1900's to help better understand phenomena through prereflective descriptions, or in the person's own words (Cohen, 1987). Husserl talked of "lived experiences", which has become a catchphrase for the phenomenological method (Beck, 1992). Since phenomenology hopes to gain a deeper understanding of everyday human experiences, it proved useful in helping to understand what was experienced during and after program participation for previous participants.

### **Case Study Site**

As noted earlier, the case study site was the Virtual YMCA program that at the time of the study, was offered by the YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington/ Brantford and

implemented by their Community Outreach Department. According to their mission, “the YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington/Brantford is a charitable organization helping people achieve personal growth in spirit, mind, and body through participation and service to the community” (YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington/Brantford, 2009). At the time of the study, their vision was to “create healthy communities in that individuals and families have opportunities to reach their potential” (YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington/Brantford, 2009). Their core values emphasized the social importance of “caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility” (YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington/Brantford, 2009). Overall, the YMCA aimed to “Build strong kids, strong families, and strong communities” (YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington/ Brantford, 2009). The Community Outreach Department, a department within the Association, had a commitment to operating programs for free of cost to high needs children and youth in Hamilton and the surrounding areas. These programs were guided by the association’s mission, vision, and values.

In the 2009/2010 school year, the Virtual YMCA program was offered in ten schools to 350 children in grades one to five. To operate the program from October to June, the cost per child was \$1,000 and thus, \$350,000 was invested in the Virtual YMCA program for the 2009/2010 school year. Each program was supervised by the Director of Community Outreach, with a direct supervisor and staff team at each location. Schools selected for this program were chosen in collaboration with local school boards. All school sites were considered “high priority” by their governing school boards or community councils due to their location in high risk neighbourhoods and/or low academic scores. Partnerships were created with each school to deliver a holistic and supportive program for the children, who were selected to attend by their classroom

teacher because they were considered “at risk” (a term used by staff and the school).

Some reasons that children were selected for the program included low supervision after school at home, trouble completing their homework, low academic success, difficulty making friends, challenging behaviour in the classroom, and/or limited opportunities for involvement in extra-curricular programs. All program sites followed the same policies and procedures and were guided by the following program goals:

- Improve literacy and numeracy skills through academic support, tutoring, and educational activities;
- Learn and demonstrate appropriate social skills through daily character development activities based on the YMCA core values of respect, caring, responsibility, and honesty;
- Develop self-confidence, efficacy, and respect through recreation, academic, and arts programs;
- Create a positive environment that supports school, family, and community and introduces the student to new opportunities for success; and,
- Provide students with young, supportive, and encouraging role models (YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington/Brantford, 2010).

Typically each program site worked with 40 students, each of whom attended three times a week (either Monday, Wednesday, and Friday or Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday). Children headed to the VY program immediately after the bell dismisses and typically the program ran until 5:00 or 5:30pm. From Monday to Thursday, the program routine focused on social skills and character development (30 minutes), snack and healthy eating (20 minutes), academic support, tutoring, and literacy or numeracy



activities (60 minutes), and recreation with skill development in the arts and physical activity (45 minutes). The staff-to-child ratio on these days was one to five. On Fridays, the children received a snack and participated in a “club” that was led by a staff member and focused on progressive skill development in a specific recreational pursuit, such as sports, dance, creative writing, photography, environmental activities, drama, scrapbooking, etc. The staff-to-child ratio on Fridays was one to ten. Children were encouraged to remain enrolled in the program from October to June, and over fifty percent of the children did.

The VY program is worthy of study because it meets almost all standards of high quality after school programs as outlined by Miller (2003). Staff members were most often post secondary students who had previous experience working with children and youth. They received training prior to starting their position, where they reviewed relevant policies and procedures, as well as attended monthly staff meetings and additional professional development trainings. Staff usually remained at one school for the duration of the year and worked matching schedules of Monday, Wednesday, Friday or Tuesday, Thursday, Friday every week to build relationships with the students. Every site had multiple resources to ensure high quality programming, including teacher resource guides, games, educational aids, homework supplies, recreation equipment, and a social skills curriculum. Clear rules were set for the children and students were encouraged to give feedback and influence the program. There were full time administrators, including a supervisor at each site and a Director who oversaw all the sites, and each site received sustainable funding to ensure the programs could become established at the chosen schools. In addition, each program involved parents throughout

the year through advisory committees and family events, had their own space within the school, and strove to connect the families to local resources in their community.

Ongoing evaluations and assessments ensured each program site meets program standards and goals every year. Site audits confirmed that policy and procedures for safety and quality were being followed and were conducted at the beginning of each program year. High Five evaluations, a standardized recreation program assessment created by Parks and Recreation Ontario, were completed by managers of other YMCA programs and each site achieved a minimum of satisfactory, with most having achieved a commendable score. Parent and participant surveys were conducted twice a year (mid and final) to provide input into the program and validate that goals were being met. Each students' reading level was also measured (mid and final) to assess how well the literacy outcomes were being achieved.

Of the ten Virtual YMCA programs, the program at Worthington School (pseudonym) was chosen for this study. This program site, as opposed to the other nine, was selected for several strategic reasons:

- It was the oldest and longest running Virtual YMCA, therefore providing richer and more contextual data since more students and families have participated in the program;
- Due to the transient nature of these high needs neighbourhoods, there was a greater chance of recruiting the target number of previous participants by having more former participants to choose from;
- The principal and a number of teachers had been actively involved in the program for several years;

- The principal, who had been at the school since the program opened, was able to help gain access to and provide comparison data and recommend previous participants who were still at the school.

Although this site had longer history, it still followed the same principles as the other nine Virtual YMCA sites. For example, all of the schools went through the same selection and approval process and had the same teacher orientation to help the school understand the program. All staff members were hired in the same manner, and new staff were randomly placed at schools based on operational need. All staff went through the same training, and the routine, program structure, and paperwork was the same across sites. For the most part, each program location had the same operating supplies, materials, snack schedules, and guest speakers. Although study findings cannot be completely representative of all students who come through the Virtual YMCA (due to different neighbourhood contexts and school cultures), data collected can help provide a unique insight to the potential of lasting impact and provide a starting point for future study.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected from May to October, 2011. Before data collection commenced, permission to conduct the research was received from the YMCA (Appendix A), the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board (Appendix B), and Brock University Ethics (Appendix C). The research proposal and plan for data collection was also reviewed and approved by an advisory committee within Brock University.

*Participant Recruitment Strategy*

In order to recruit appropriate participants who were able to contribute to the research questions, the following criteria for research participants was established: participants must have attended the program for at least eight consecutive months; be out of the program for at least one full program year; and currently attend the same elementary school where the program was held. During recruitment, Stake's (1995) recommendation for exploratory research was followed, which was to select easy and willing subjects to maximize what could be learned in a limited amount of time.

To create a "pool" of potential research participants, I first reviewed archived registration forms from the YMCA. I gathered all of the files I could find for former participants in the VY program at Worthington School and created an excel spreadsheet with the children's first and last names, parent's name, address, and listed phone numbers according to their registration form. Prior to the study beginning, I anticipated the number of previous program participants to be about 300. However due to the following extenuating circumstances most of these participants could not be found:

- The school was being rebuilt in the 2009/2010 school year, and all of the students were moved to a holding school outside of their school boundaries. The principal had mentioned that they lost a lot of kids through this move and could no longer track them down.
- The school only transitioned into a Kindergarten to grade eight school in 2010, prior to then the school only went up to grade 6, so a lot of the older participants had moved into middle schools and could no longer be contacted using school data.

- Archived registration forms from the YMCA for this specific school could not be located for several program years.

As a result, information on participants in the earlier years of the program could not be found and thus, the majority of my pool of potential participants were children who had attended during the 2009/2010 and 2008/2009 school years. This list contained 58 potential participants for the study.

The list was then shared with the VY program's current supervisor, previous supervisor (who was there from 2008-2010), and the school principal in order to remove those children who did not meet the criteria for participation because they were either no longer at the school, still registered in the program, or withdrew from the program before completing a full year. Based on this feedback, I learned that nearly three-quarters of the children on the list did not meet the criteria. Thus, my revised list contained 15 eligible participants for the study.

I attempted to contact all 15 participants on my list. Of the 15, four participants did not have active phone numbers and could not be contacted and three did not return my phone calls. For the remaining eight, I first asked to speak with a parent, using the names provided on the registration form. I then introduced myself to the parent as a researcher with Brock University and a manager with the YMCA and used a telephone script to introduce the study details and criteria for participants (Appendix D). The remaining eight participants agreed to participate in the study and interview.

I sent these eight families a formal information package including a letter of invitation (Appendix E), parent consent form (Appendix F), and participant assent form (Appendix G). Incentives were also offered to study participants upon introduction of the

study. A \$20 gift certificate to a store of their choice was given to the children participating in the interview and a \$20 gift certificate to a local grocery store was given to their family. The gift cards were provided to the student and family prior to the interview taking place so they did not feel coerced to continue with the interview or to provide “right” answers. All children who participated were also entered into a draw for a new computer.

After the information package was provided to families, a time was set up to review the information, retrieve the signed permission forms, and set up an interview location and time (sometimes the interview happened right after this meeting). In total, I retrieved eight permission forms however only six individuals followed through and completed the interview.

I offered the participants the option of choosing the location for the interview. One interview was conducted inside the school, one on a bench by the school’s playground, and four took place in the participant’s house. Parent participation or presence was not required for the interviews to take place, however recognizing the interviews may be sensitive and personal in nature, parents were welcomed to stay for all or part of the interview. For three interviews, a parent remained close by. For the other three, parents monitored the interview from afar.

### *Participant Interviews*

As mentioned earlier, the research questions were directed toward understanding the meaning and significance of the experience and the study was guided by the principles of phenomenology. As such, interviews were consistent with the phenomenological approach. In this approach, the purpose of the interview and interview

questions is to collect “descriptions whilst preserving the spontaneity of the subjects’ lived experiences (Jasper, 1994, p. 311). This criterion of collecting meaning and descriptions meant that the interview guide was semi-structured (Appendix H) and allowed the children to deviate from the questions in order to elicit rich stories and gain perspectives I may have not considered. Questions attempted to explore the lived experience of the phenomenon by asking participants to describe their experience as fully and deeply as possible to help them reflect on the experience and share thoughts, feelings, and stories. Probing questions were used to help the participant expand further, provide more details, or to help understand why they described something the way they did. If their parent attempted to answer a question for the child, I would ask the participant for permission for their parent to give their opinion, however in the narratives only the child’s voice was used.

At the start of the interview, I explained to the student what to expect, why I was asking the questions, and encouraged stories and feelings while emphasizing there were no right or wrong answers. Each participant was asked to give a pseudonym that I used throughout the interview instead of their real name. After the interview, I thanked each participant and gained permission to contact them in case I had additional follow up questions.

After completing the interview with all six participants, an interview was conducted with the former school principal. After receiving consent (Appendix I) I used a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix J) to ask the principal about the school neighbourhood, the significance of having the VY operate in her school, and each of the students who participated.

All the interviews, with the exception of one, were tape recorded. Each recorded interview was immediately transcribed, re-reviewed, and the digital file destroyed to ensure confidentiality. All interview transcripts and permission forms were kept in a locked cabinet that only I had access to.

### **Methodological Issues That Influenced Data Collection**

#### *Tracking Down Participants in a Transient Community*

As is apparent in the description above, a major challenge of this research project was contacting previous participants from several years ago. The school that housed the Virtual YMCA program was located in a neighbourhood in where residents were highly transient with high rental rates, and families often moved from one residence to another. I had archived paper registration forms with family contact information, however these were often misfiled, incomplete, or parents did not have active telephone numbers at the time of registration.

In response, I narrowed the pool of previous participants down to those who had been out of the program for only one to two years, mainly from the 2009/2010 program year. I also had more success contacting families who left cell phone number contacts, instead of just house numbers, as this number could follow a family from one residence to another.

As noted by the principal, the six participants that did agree to participate were more stable and less transient than other families in the school, which is why I was able to find and contact them more easily than others.



*Building Trust with Families*

When first contacting families, many of the families did not pick up the phone on first contact and I had to leave messages asking them to call me back. I rarely got call backs, but instead when I called a second time from the same number, the parents would pick up and indicated that they were already familiar with who I was, based on my message. When I then introduced the study to families, it became clear that they lacked trust in the research process. Some families were hesitant to share information on the phone, meet in person, or confirm the child who participated in the program. Others would ask me to call back, but then would no longer pick up the phone when I called.

To help with building trust with the families, I used my connection as a manager with the YMCA when introducing myself and made reference to the person who referred me to their family (often it was their previous program supervisor). I found that parents were more willing to share information or meet after providing this information to them, as it seemed to create a foundation of implied trust.

For those who agreed to participate, a number of the parents commented that the program did a lot for their child and family, so they felt this was the way they could give back. One parent commented that she never meets with anyone or answers questions, but since the previous supervisor helped her some through some difficult times, she would do it this one time. She also made me promise to tell the supervisor that she was participating and the reasons why. However, this same parent agreed to participate only on the condition that the interview not be taped, that I did not talk to the school, that she monitored the questions I asked and could refuse to answer ones that she considered “irrelevant,” that I did not mail anything to their house or ask for her address, and that we

meet at the school in a public area. In contrast, another mother, once she knew I was from the YMCA, eagerly let me into her house and left me alone with the two children while she went out to pick up another from school.

### *Issues with Giving Incentives*

Another issue I faced was determining an appropriate incentive for participating in the study. Giving monetary incentives for participation in psychological and quantitative studies is commonplace and becoming more common in qualitative research (Head, 2009). However, distribution of money and other incentives can pose ethical concerns since informants may feel coerced into participating, which undermines the principles of free and informed consent. Despite this concern, many researchers feel that appropriate participants cannot be recruited without some sort of incentive (Head, 2009). In addition, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) mentioned the need to avoid exploitation of participants and that researchers should recognise participants' "debt to the societies in which they work and their obligation to reciprocate with people studied in appropriate ways" (AAA, 1998, p. 3), especially if researchers are receiving funding for their study (Head, 2009). In order to ensure the incentives remain ethical, incentives were given at the beginning of the interviews and it was stressed that the incentive was for their attendance only and is not reflective of their performance. This gave a "clear message that participants are being rewarded for participating, not for what they say" (Head, 2009, p. 341). The incentives were also small enough to avoid coercion but still recognized the participant's time and effort (Head, 2009).

*Balancing Researcher Passion with Pestering*

Another issue I faced was trying to balance my passion for conducting my research with the feeling that I was ‘pestering’ families to participate. As my pool of potential participants continued to shrink, I was eager to contact each one to at least introduce the study and invite them to participate. I exhausted every avenue I could think of to try to get accurate contact information, including using previous registration information, school information, information from current program participants (in the event there were siblings still attending), the phone book, and reverse number lookups online.

Once I had a number that I knew worked, I made an aggressive attempt to contact the family, including leaving messages, calling on different days, calling at different times of days, and having the school pass along a message that I was trying to contact them. When I introduced the study to families and mailed them information, I also made an effort to follow up, sometimes calling the family again several times to see if they received the materials and to set up a meeting time. Sometimes I lost contact with families at this stage when they did not pick up or return my calls.

I often had to keep my “researcher passion” in check to avoid pestering the families. Some families did not value the reason for the research and questioned how speaking with their child would inform anything. I limited my phone calls to three messages (one a week for three weeks) and on the third message would indicate this would be the last time I called, the incentives for participating, and how to contact me.

*Finding a Suitable Interview Setting*

As mentioned earlier, I let the families decide where the interviews would take place. There were some strengths in interviewing in a location of their choice – the participants felt comfortable, the setting was informal and facilitated conversation, and the parents could remain nearby to monitor the interview if they wished. However, there were some limitations to interviewing in these settings, particularly distractions and interruptions. At the two family houses, the interviews were often interrupted by people coming and going, the phone ringing, siblings asking questions, or the television/music on in an adjacent room. At the park, interviews were interrupted because there were a lot of children nearby (especially since school let out an hour before), it was an outdoor space used often by the community, and the police were present. In the school, there was only one room free in the school and it was quite busy because school just dismissed, there was an after school program running in the space next door, and some teachers came into the space to pick something up.

In order to accommodate, I sometimes had to address the distractions, make side conversations, or stop to explain what we were doing and ask people to give us some privacy. These side conversations were removed from the transcripts, and I had to sometimes go back to the last question ask and rephrase in order to get the interview back on track.

*Interviewing Children*

Another issue I faced was the young age of the interview participants, which ranged from eight to twelve years old. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), children are easily influenced by interviewer's suggestions and leading questions,

affecting reliability. Power imbalance can also cause a child to give unreliable answers in order to please the researcher (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). In response, I ensured that questions were simple, age-appropriate, and asked one at a time. If the child was confused or needed clarification, possible examples of answers were not given in order to avoid the child repeating the suggested answer (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Instead, the question was reworded or skipped.

To help ensure questions were appropriate, matched the level of the intended participants, and were comprehended as expected, I piloted the interview questions with two children of a similar age who were not involved in the research study. To avoid a power imbalance, I made it clear that I was not associated with the participant's classroom teacher or program staff and that the answers given would have no consequences on their participation in the program. Despite these efforts, there were still some issues encountered when interviewing children:

- Children had a limited vocabulary to respond to my “why” questions, especially questions around why they experienced something a particular way (i.e. why something was “fun”).
- They sometimes had trouble remembering beyond one to two years back, and could recall stories from their last year of participation, but not their first.
- Despite positioning myself separate from the school or program, adult-child power was still present. Children would sometimes ask in the middle of the interview or at the end, if their responses were “right or wrong”. I had to encourage them to share their personal stories and constantly reassure them that

there were no right or wrong answers. If their parent was present during the interview, there was often also a check in with their parent as well.

- Children would become easily frustrated if they felt like they were disappointing me by not being able to answer a question or if they could not fully explain their feelings. For example, when I asked one child how he felt in the program, he responded that he felt “special” and when I asked why to try to get him to elaborate on the program aspects that led to them feeling special, he hid his face and said “I dunno, I just know I felt special!”
- Parents sometimes wanted to help their child answer a question or remind them of a story/feeling relating to the program. One parent conducted these conversations with her child in a different language while another parent reminded her child that she needed to remember the negative things that happened in program too.

Despite these challenges and concerns, children did offer their perspective on their Virtual YMCA experience. Towards the end of the interview many of the children were noticeably more comfortable, were able to open up more, and we began to build a rapport. Children did share stories of their negative experiences with staff and other children in the program, as well as share their positive experiences and stories.

#### *Balancing Other Stakeholder Requirements*

The methods for the project were chosen based on principles of case study research and ethics requirements from Brock University. However, to receive approval for the research to take place within the school board, I had to meet additional requirements which required changes to the data collection plan:

- **Contacting families:** It was originally proposed that the school would release updated contact information to the researcher to contact families. However, the school board did not approve this approach, and so the study was changed so that the school would need to make first contact to introduce the study, send home materials, and I would have to wait for them to contact me or return the forms if they were interested. This new approach meant there was little opportunity for me to directly build rapport with the families or utilize my connection to the YMCA or their previous supervisor to leverage interviews. Because of this, no families were contacted using school contact data.
- **Approval deadlines:** It was originally proposed that the teachers would be contacted before the end of the school year so that the student's performance was forefront in their mind. However, due to extended and delayed approval deadlines from the school board, I was not able to contact teachers until the day before the end of school. In addition, the teachers were on holidays for six weeks starting the week after school until mid-August, and they could not be re-contacted until that time. Because of this delay, teachers were not contacted and teacher data was not gathered before the school year was complete. When attempting to contact teachers in August, only two out of the five teachers were still teaching at the school.
- **Confidentiality of teachers:** It was originally proposed that I would keep the data I collected from teachers confidential from the students. However, it was school board research policy that this data be shared with families upon their request. This new requirement would limit the comfort level of teachers to share

information candidly or provide less-than-positive remarks on a particular student in case it got back to their family.

### **Final Data Collection Plan and the Use of Narrative Inquiry**

Regardless of the challenges faced, I pursued the research with the motto that “any data collected will help inform an area of research where so much is unknown” and collected what I could. This resulted in a new study plan that focused and relied heavily on the interview data from previous participants, set within a program and neighbourhood context that was informed by the principal’s insights and regional demographic data. I had originally planned to communicate the data I collected as themes, however as I began to code and organize the findings accordingly, I struggled with the idea that the participants’ voice and stories, told in their own words, would be lost. Other researchers have also struggled with the limitations of methods that are preoccupied with obtaining information and themes at the expense of understanding expression (Sandelowski, 1991). Given the limited sample and the exploratory nature of the project, I turned to narrative inquiry to inform an alternative way to present the data along with the thematic interpretation.

Narrative inquiry is often used in social sciences, and is rooted firmly in a wide range of qualitative traditions, including phenomenology and across many different research methodologies, including case studies (Leggo, 2004). Ultimately, all approaches “focus on the composition of a story as a way to represent experiences.” As Riessman (2003) explained, narrative researchers look for how culture or information speak through an individual’s story and how those individual stories compare to several accounts and stories. In this inquiry, language is considered “deeply constitutive of reality” (Riessman,



2003, p. 4). Cronon (1992) explained that narratives are fundamental ways that humans can organize and understand experience, not only as individuals but as communities and societies: “our human perspective is that we inhabit an endlessly storied world” (p. 1368). However narratives do not just speak for themselves or have unanalyzed merit (Riessman, 2003). Thus, they need to be presented along with interpretation. The next section describes the process I followed for data analysis and interpretation, using both the narratives and transcripts.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

As mentioned by Creswell (1998), there is no consensus or “off the shelf” (p. 142) way to analyze qualitative data, but rather analysis occurs in a custom-built manner, where intuition and insight guides the direction of analysis and interpretation. Yin (1993) elaborates further: “There are few fixed formulas or cookbook recipes to guide [analysis]...Instead much depends on an investigator’s own style of rigorous thinking, along with the sufficient presentation of evidence” (p. 110).

Case study analysis guided the framework and approach to data analysis, where data were analyzed in an on-going, “spiral” approach. As a result, data were analyzed at the time of collection and then reviewed and reanalyzed after each new piece of data were collected, rather than a direct, fixed linear approach. This approach allowed the data to be continually revisited, reorganized, and restructured to create an in-depth picture of the over-arching case (Creswell, 1998). This approach also allowed for interview questions to be revisited, revised, and added to future guides as the study progressed – a process that is aligned closely with the principles of exploratory case study research.

Analysis of the individual interview transcripts was guided by phenomenological methods and techniques. As described by Banonis (1989), the purpose of data analysis in phenomenology is to “preserve the uniqueness of each lived experience of the phenomenon while permitting an understanding of the meaning of the phenomenon itself.” There are various methods that can be used for analyzing phenomenological and narrative data. Thematic analysis is one approach that is common across both phenomenological and narrative research (and also is one of the most commonly used analytical techniques used in qualitative analysis; Howitt & Cramer, 2008), and seemed most appropriate for use in this study. In thematic analysis, the researcher is responsible for identifying a limited number of themes, which reflect the data collected. As further described by Howitt and Cramer (2008), data familiarization is vital for thematic analysis and they recommend the researchers carry out data collection, transcription, and analysis themselves, which was the approach followed in this study.

To strive for data familiarization, researchers code their data by applying brief verbal descriptions to small chunks of data. For this study, the transcripts were coded with key words that related to the data and summarized the responses provided in the interview. Codes were altered and modified as needed to limit the breadth and amount of specific codes. Using these codes, themes that related specifically to the broader research questions of meaning and significance began to be identified. Given the limited number of transcripts, the incidence and prevalence of examples and codes, as they related to the themes, was tracked in order to communicate to the reader how often a theme or experience was encountered. As is common in exploratory case studies, the research

questions were then reworked and refined based on this data collection and analysis outcome (Tellis, 1997).

Using the refined research questions and coded, relevant data, the transcripts were then reconstructed into individual narrative stories. As explained by Leggo (2004), one of the challenges that narrative researchers face “is how to compose a story that represents experiences truthfully while also acknowledging that in all our narrative research we can never tell the whole story. There are always far more experiences than we can narrate” (p. 98). Therefore, any narrative developed can only truly be a small snapshot or fragment of the wide and complex experiences that influence us daily. Further complicating the analysis process, Kelly (1997) stated that “truth is multiple – and always ever partial” (p. 66).

Despite limitations, I felt that portraying the individual transcripts as personal stories allowed the reader to at least experience, even if briefly, the words, stories, and responses which impacted me so profoundly. It is in the children’s way of describing that we can begin to truly understand the complex lives lived and no matter how accurately we theme and categorize, we can never truly capture how meaning and significance is highly individualized and personal.

With this perspective, the transcripts were then edited to exclude data that were off topic or unclear in meaning. The remaining responses and stories were then linked together with researcher narration to create a story in as much of the participant’s voice and words as possible. The narratives followed the flow of the conversation with the student, with the exception of some stories that came out later in the conversation, which were weaved into the topic from earlier in the conversation.

At this stage, the narratives then underwent further thematic analysis as it relates to narrative inquiry. Riessman (1993) offered several examples of narrative analysis models, including thematic analysis. She described narrative thematic analysis methods that emphasized the content of the text and “what” is said, instead of “how” it is said. Narrative thematic analysis focuses on the “told” rather than the “telling”. This approach is supported by a philosophy which views language as a “direct and unambiguous route to meaning” (Riessman, 1993, p. 2). Therefore, participants use language and storytelling to convey meaning, and it is a researcher’s task to make sense of that meaning. For this study, the narratives were re-analyzed in their new form to further investigate lasting meaning and impact. Specific quotes relating to each theme were then pulled out to highlight findings.

Typically narratives that undergo thematic analysis are organized as case studies or vignettes to provide illustration to the object of study (Riessman, 1993), which is how the narratives are presented to the reader in Chapter Four.

### **Methodological Issues During Data Analysis and Interpretation**

One of the main methodological issues I faced in this study was the possibility of researcher bias. As I have noted earlier, I have been involved as a manager for the Virtual YMCA programs for three years, and through this time I developed a commitment to and belief in the significance of this program. As mentioned by Jasper (1994), “the researcher comes to the phenomena with a set of preconceptions and experiences which may influence the way the experience is described by the participant, and the way the data are used, interpreted or analyzed” (p. 311). To manage the influence of my preconceptions, during the research process, I engaged in the use of “bracketing.” Bracketing is a practice

that “involves the deliberate examination by the researchers of their own beliefs about the phenomenon and the temporary suspension of these” (Jasper, 1994, p. 311).

Prior to data collection, I used a reflection journal to help understand any preconceived notions, thoughts, or ideas I had about the long term impacts of program participation. I also used the journal throughout data collection to help me record my experience, my thoughts during the interview, any factors that may have influenced my attitudes towards the interview or the participant, and any reflection on what I might assume or take away after the interview. I also reflected on my interactions with the families prior to the interview to help understand and bracket any beliefs I may have formed. I referred to these notes during data analysis to understand what my thoughts were and to help me look at the participant’s experience with “wide-open eyes, with knowledge, facts, theories held at bay”, since “concentrating on the experience is absolutely necessary” (Jasper, 1994, p. 311).

In addition to bracketing, other practices, as discussed by Jasper (1994), were employed to ensure validity in the data. During the interviews, clarification and requests for clarification and further examples were often used to ensure a full understanding of the phenomenon was collected. Analysis was also performed from the interview transcripts and narratives themselves, rather than from reworded or changed forms. Oiler (1982) suggested that an important test for validity in phenomenology is whether the findings are recognized to be true by those who had the experience. During the interviews, the children’s stories were accepted as true and were not challenged by myself. If a child could not expand or elaborate on a description, feeling, or claim made, I noted it on the interview guide and asked about it again later in the interview in a

different way, or reflected after the interview as to why the child may have not been able to recall all the details.

In addition, the narratives created from the participant's interview transcripts attempted to stay as true as possible to the participant's voice (Banonis, 1989). The transcript data was manipulated as little as possible with limited interference from my voice to connect the participants' stories. Then, once the narratives were developed using the participant's voice as much as possible, the participant was given the opportunity to re-read their narrative and validate the story created, as suggested by Forrest (1989). Four children had minor detail changes (i.e. changes to grades referenced in stories, or games played, or changes to staff names who taught them skills). Two children did not have any changes.

Validity can also be enhanced through collaboration of other sources of data (Jasper, 1994). In this study, the former principal who knew each of the participants and their families was interviewed. During this interview, questions were asked about the participant and their families to help provide greater context about the child and their story. The principal also had an opportunity to read each narrative and provide comments and feedback to help with clarification and accuracy of objective data (i.e. family composition, age, dates, teachers rather than accuracy of the participant's subjective perceptions).

However, even with these efforts there remained some issues and challenges which arose through data analysis which challenge the credibility of the narratives and findings. The first limitation was that very little collaborating data was available to further validate the child's stories. Report cards, grades, and school records were not

made available to me as originally approved. I also attempted to interview the parents of each child to provide a greater context to the narratives, however at the time of contact one family was going through a separation or divorce, one would no longer return phone calls, another parent disagreed, and the other requested no further follow up after the initial participant's interview.

In addition, the interviews, transcripts, and ultimately the narratives presented in the following chapter, paint primarily a positive picture of participants' experience in the program. One reason for this might be due to the study sampling criteria. The criteria (completed at least one year of the program with good attendance, out of the program for at least one to two years, and still attending the same school) would lend itself to recruiting participants who had a positive experience. If the program was significant and meaningful a year later, it most likely was because the program was positive. Children who actually completed a full year of program with good attendance, as opposed to those who withdrew early or weren't connected to the program with regular attendance, most likely did so because they were having primarily positive experiences. In addition, given the high transiency rates of this neighbourhood, these students may be exemplary cases of lasting meaning and significance. Compared to other participants perhaps, those who chose to participate in my study may have had some sort of increased stability in their life, and this may have influenced how they experienced the program and processed their experience.

Another reason why the narratives were primarily positive can directly relate to the limitations of retrospective research, or research which attempts to have an individual reconstruct the past and their experience in it. Snelgrove & Havitz (2010) explained that

when people reconstruct the past, they tend to align their accounts with their current situation (both intentionally and unconsciously). People also tend to seek meaning in past experiences and it has been found that some people may not want to reduce the worth or meaning of their previous experience, especially when those experiences are tied to conceptions of self (Yarrow et al., 1970). Thus, people tend to provide retrospective responses which preserve their identity and standing, especially if the account relates to a personal need for achievement and social acceptance. It has also been found that retrospective accounts are likely to be less accurate when the information might negatively affect their careers (Huber & Power, 1985) or self-esteem (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

Some of the above limitations were observed during the analysis process. When reviewing notes from my initial discussions with the parents, it was noticed that for two of the participants (Bianca and George), the parents had warned me that their children had negative experiences in the Virtual YMCA program. I reassured the parents that I was interested in hearing about all experiences, positive and negative, and suggested that we let their child decide if they want to participate and share only what they felt comfortable with. However, when reviewing the transcripts and narratives, the children spoke of the program as generally positive. For example, when Bianca was describing being teased by other participants, she elaborated that it was those times when the staff made her feel better and would sit beside her. Additionally, when asking Dan questions, his mom would sometimes try to remind him of negative stories or experiences in the program. However, Dan expressed a different perspective, didn't recall what his mom was referring to, or instead he minimized the negative and highlighted the positive. For



example, when his mom said he didn't have fun there, Dan disagreed and said that was only towards the end and continued to speak about positive experiences and activities.

The last credibility issue is the lack of attention in the study to the relationship between program significance and the socioeconomic and ethnoracial characteristics of the participants. Despite living in a neighbourhood with high rates of poverty, their new immigrant status, or their visible minority status, the children described or defined themselves in terms of socioeconomic or ethnoracial status or made connections between these attributes and the experiences they had in the program. I believe this lack of attention to diversity in the study is related to the age and developmental stage of the children (they may have been unable to critically reflect on this topic), as well as the lack of attention that the Virtual YMCA placed on addressing social issues or racialization directly. The Virtual YMCA took a "colour-blind" approach to its participants, embracing all cultures and differences to foster a sense of belonging, without identifying or accounting for specific differences directly. However, this could also mean that the YMCA operates from a standpoint in which the dominant social identities are treated as normative and alternative perspectives are silenced (Glover, 2007). The lack of attention to diversity is further complicated by the limitations of narrative inquiry research, where only a snapshot of a person's life can be told, omitting many other important factors in their life and lived experience such as race, class, interconnectedness with others and the community (Leggo, 2004).

Thus, when reading the narratives in the following chapter, the reader cannot help but question whether the narratives and themes capture the 'truth' of the participant experience, given how positive and uncomplicated they are. However, narrative truth is

distinguished and different than other formal science truths, and the reader is encouraged to instead, place an emphasis on the extent to which the narratives presented are life-like, intelligible, and plausible (Sandelowski, 1991). As described by Sandelowski, the narrator strives for narrative probability (a story that makes sense), narrative fidelity (a story consistent with past experience), and aesthetic finality (a story with satisfactory closure and representational appeal). She further described:

Located in a hermeneutic circle of (re)interpretation, narratives with common, story elements can be reasonably expected to change from telling to telling, making the idea of empirically validating them for consistency or stability completely alien to the concept of narrative truth. Misguided efforts to verify findings (for example, the use of test-retest and interrater reliability kinds of measures) suggest a misplaced occupation with empirical rather than narrative standards of truth and a profound lack of understanding of the temporal and liminal nature and vital meaning making functions of storytelling (p. 165).

Despite the concerns for accuracy on retrospective accounts, it is worth reminding that as an exploratory case study, the findings of this study are not meant to provide generalizations or findings which are relevant to all cases, but rather to act as a “prelude to (further) social research” (Tellis, 1997, para. 20). In addition, since exploratory case studies seek easy and willing subjects to maximize information and limit time, a good case “does not have to defend its typicality” (Tellis, 1997, para. 19). Ultimately, the end results are stories as told by children at one point and time in their life. These stories represent truth to the child and their understanding, given their current situation and age.

The narratives and interpreted themes can then provide a “starting point for the examination of the phenomena through other research methods” (Jasper, 1994, p. 312).

Provided in Chapter Four and Five are the seven narratives collected from the participants and the former school principal, followed by thematic analysis interpretation, and discussion on the implications for after school programs, future research, and funding.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Below are narrative stories written from all the interviews conducted with the six participants and former school principal, Trisha (all names have been changed). Each narrative starts with contextualizing background data and then moves into the interviewee's voice (in italics) taken directly from the interview transcripts. Narratives are guided and linked together with researcher's voice (plain text).

### **Neighbourhood and School Context**

The City of Hamilton is divided into fifteen wards, and the ward and neighbourhood where Worthington School was located had many unique challenges facing it, as identified by researchers (Buist, 2009), census data (City of Hamilton Ward Profiles, 2009), and the former school principal. Census and demographic data from 2006 (City of Hamilton Ward Profiles, 2009), showed that the ward where Worthington School was located had 37,815 residents, which accounted for 7.5 percent of the City's total population. This report also showed a deficiency in this ward for neighbourhood and community parks with a higher proportion of apartment type buildings (79% compared to 29.3% City average) and a lower proportion of single detached houses (13% compared to City average of 57.6%). Forty percent of the ward's area was comprised of residential use, which was significantly higher than the 10% average for the rest of the City. There was also a much higher proportion of rented housing (75.1% compared to 31.7% average) in this ward with 10.3 acres of vacant residential land. Residents in this area had higher mobility rates with much higher rates for residents who had moved in the past year (24.6% compared to 12.6% City average).

Demographically, there were also a higher proportion of lone parent families (24.7% compared to 17.8%) and recent immigrants (10.4% compared to 3.3%). Over 21% of residents in this area spoke a non-official language most often at home (compared to 12.5%). The ward also had a higher proportion of residents who self-identified as being a visible minority (25.7% compared to 13.6%). Economically, this ward had a higher unemployment rate (9.2% compared to 6.5%) with a much higher proportion of residents in lower income brackets (41.4% compared to 18.1%). Over 55% of children in this ward were living in low income households (compared to 26.4% City-wide).

Similarly, Code Red research (Buist, 2009) showed that Worthington's immediate neighbourhood had some of the highest rates (within the top 20% percentile) of new immigrant residents, early high school dropout, residents living below the poverty line, and lone female parents. Additionally, these indicators and rates have been associated with an increased need for medical attention and health care, including some of the highest rates for hospital admissions, emergency room visits, low birth weight babies, and psychiatric care.

The perspective of Trisha, the former school principal, supported the picture painted by these statistics. According to Trisha, the school's neighbourhood was very high needs and risky and the school was considered "high risk" by the school board. Being principal for ten years, she had seen the neighbourhood surrounding the school progress and change. Below is how Trisha described Worthington School's neighbourhood and demographics.

*I was principal for ten years and the Virtual YMCA was there the whole time. In my opinion, every child at (our school) is at risk and could use the program. The*

community around the school is *certainly very high needs, and very diverse with an ethnic population*. It is a *very isolated community* and when I came to the school *I saw that there was really nothing for the kids to do. It was just very high needs and not a lot of pride in the neighbourhood*.

*There's a high homeless population because (a shelter) is just down the street and that certainly was a concern. The neighbourhood is also at risk for crime, for drugs, and I know there is a lot of prostitution and the families see that going on. The kids are at risk for perpetuating that cycle. That's a norm around here and it's a concern of the kids not getting out of that and relying on social assistance, hand to mouth and people coming and going out of their lives. There are also a lot of mental health issues in the adult population which filters down to the kids too. The neighbourhood is seen as very unsafe, and that comes through if you talk to the kids. The community is dangerous place. But I think the community is changing as families put down roots and the kids are getting those values. It's got to change and I do think it will change.*

*The school and playground is a little safe haven. We've never had much vandalism at the school and didn't have windows broken. And even though the neighbourhood is a bit of a rougher neighbourhood, the school was always a little bit of an area where people didn't go in and do bad things to. And certainly now that the school has been rebuilt it's really seen as a place where people can go and meet and talk and have a good time. I don't really hear about bad things happening on the weekend, kids are fairly respectful of it.*

*The school is so important to some of these families because there's not much for them around there. The park isn't a particularly safe place to be. But the school is seen*

*as safe and a lot of the parents let their kids come over to the school and play. So by having families able to learn and recreate in the same space, it was a community hub. They didn't have to leave or form trust somewhere else. We were all-encompassing.*

*When I first came to the school, certainly I saw the things the kids didn't have – clothing, the proper food. I was worried about their nourishment. Also, their academics – the teachers had a lower expectation for the kids because of where they came from. And I think we worked really hard to improve that and I think we have. When I first got there, there was a really negative nickname for the school. Teachers didn't choose to transfer there. But I think we started to turn that culture around and the Virtual YMCA was all part of that. It became a place where things were happening and teachers came in and felt like I did – these kids need more than just nine to three when they are taught academics, there's so much more that needs to be done for these kids. There's very little turn over from staff there now. People want to come to (our school).*

*For a lot of our ethnic families, the school is the school. When they are there, they are "your kids". It's not a place they are used to being involved with in their past cultures, and so I think we had to work pretty hard to get the parents in and feeling comfortable. Most of our kids come from the high rises and sometimes there would be two or three families living in one apartment. So they lived in pretty crowded situations and pretty chaotic situations with not a lot of structure in their lives. And parents are doing the best they could, but parents have had a hard life. If you think of our parents that have immigrated into Canada, what a shock to their system - when the parents come to Canada, I don't think that's what they have been sold on what Canada is going to be. I think they think of the north with lots of trees and greenery and then they come to*

*concrete. They were ripped away from what they had known with no family, so really a lonely life, especially for the moms. And even for the dads, I think a lot of them couldn't use their skills. It wasn't easy. But I think they sacrificed that so their kids could have a better life. And our families who are Canadian born don't live in that area because they want to; it's a matter of necessity. It's a hard life for those families. I also think a lot of our families deal with mental health issues too.*

*Our typical family structure is single parent families, quite a few families living with grandparents, and parents who weren't around anymore. That was often associated with drugs I would think. Often there are pretty big families too. Certainly our immigrant families came with five or six kids and, our Canadian families often had three or four – more than the average. I used to say that there were 32 languages spoken at our school, but it was hard to keep track of. Certainly we faced a lot of diversity at our school. To the kids, school was a nice place to be and they didn't want to be sent home or disappoint you.*

*These kids have seen a lot more of life than their teachers. I came one morning and there was a body dead in the park. Interestingly enough, the teachers were most upset by it and the kids didn't think too much of it. And I think the kids have seen where they came from, refugee camps, dead bodies and people disappearing, and they just took it in their stride and that was very telling for me. Because I thought the kids would be devastated, and it really didn't seem to affect them as much as the staff.*

### **Significance of the Virtual YMCA for the School**

Since Trisha had been at Worthington School for the same amount of time as the program, she had unique insights on the meaning and significance of having this after



school program in her school. The program got started at Worthington when the program's pilot site closed and the kids were relocated to this school. The program shifted locations, and had been running there ever since. The program was originally funded by the YMCA and since it had started it ran a yearly dinner-dance and auction to raise monies to continue financing the \$40,000 it takes to run yearly at the school. Although the program was administered and run by the YMCA, the school played a key role in helping to guide the program, referring children, and cooperating with staff to ensure goals for individual participants are set and met. Trisha spoke to how the program had impacted her school over ten years and some of the key features that contributed to its success.

*At our school we had the Virtual YMCA and a homework club and that ran Tuesday and Thursday, so kids could do something everyday. We also had the breakfast program - so we didn't have daycare in the morning, but kids could come from 7:30 on and have breakfast and socialize. I think it was those three things that really made such a huge impact on the families.*

*The Virtual YMCA program was an easy choice for parents because it was connected to the school and parents already trusted it because the school and teachers did. For families who don't participate in anything, the Virtual YMCA was the program that could convince them to. Before the Virtual YMCA was there, parents would just take them to school and then home. This was just seamless because the kids went right from school, so they knew their kids were safe until 5:30pm. If they were to go home first, you're going to lose them because they're not going to come back. This way, parents knew and saw it as a continuation as the school. I think with a lot of our families, it takes*

*a long time to build up trust, so they saw it all – the school, the afterschool programs, the caring staff - and it built the parents' trust in the school and staff and the afterschool programs. We wanted it to be a seamless process for the kids, it's just part of their day.*

*The program also eliminated a lot of barriers because parents didn't have the money to put them in things or transportation to get them there.*

*The school board also bought into the program. When we moved schools, the board paid for a separate bus to come and bring the kids back home from the holding school. And the board doesn't offer to pay for much. And that really said a lot to me about how much they value the program. It said a lot to me that the board would do that.*

*The program had a lot of meaning and impact for our families. For one, I think having the parents have to pick up the kids brought a buy in, because the parents had to get to know the staff. I think those parents become more engaged in the school because they had more ownership. For them, the school was their community hub and it was sort of everything. Also, when those parents would come and pick up their kids from the Virtual Y, they would socialize with each other, they might come in and happen to meet their child's teacher leaving and talk to them, and certainly they would talk to me. So I do think they had more engagement and ownership in their child's school.*

*Also, the Y staff are viewed differently than teachers. There was more fun, kidding and kibitzing in the Y; where a teacher really can't do that when they have a class of 20 to 30 kids. It's a different relationship. I think the Y staff are great too because they were younger. So the kids saw them not like mom or dad or like teacher, they were like big brother or big sister and I think those relationships meant so much to the kids.*

Having the program run in the school for ten years also had great significance. *The Virtual YMCA was seen as part of (our school). So it was that trust factor. Whereas other programs were programs that were only there for a year; it was great for their kids to do, but it doesn't have that emotional impact. Where I think with the Virtual Y it's that whole trust. It's all about trust and knowing that you are going to have that caring young adult that they can then talk to. I know a lot of our parents, I know one in particular, would go and problem solve with the Y staff with what they were seeing. I think it's nice too because you hear from a teacher how your child is behaving, and that is such an authority figure. But you might hear the same thing from the Virtual Y staff who is a young adult and it just goes... together.*

*I think the long term sustainability is important. In the beginning I think there was a lot more turn over of kids, they didn't necessarily buy into it. Where now the Virtual YMCA is part of the culture of (our school) and people know the program and you don't have to sell it anymore - parents want to be in it. Again it's building that trust. If you have it for one year and it may be gone or you don't have staff that builds those relationships with the families, it doesn't have the same impact.*

*I also saw happening that our mobility rate dropped considerably and I really think that the Virtual Y is one of those reasons that parents were staying at the school. Parents saw the school as a place where their kids' needs were met and I think parents valued that. When I went to the school the mobility rates were over 100% because kids would come and go more than they stayed. But now parents go to other schools and come back and say "they don't have those programs after school" or "we have to pay for something". I think it was the extra things that happened at (our school) that parents just*

*took advantage of and didn't realize that other schools didn't have it. They really appreciate what was offered outside of school time.*

*We were the neediest school at the board forever. And two years ago we dropped and were about the sixth neediest school and I took offense to that, but the only thing that had changed was our mobility rate, so it was a significant amount that our families were staying and putting down roots. Or if they were moving they tried to stay within school boundaries. And I have had parents say that they don't want to stay in this neighbourhood but they will stay until their kids are done grade eight. When the kids move from school to school there's gaps in their education and there's that whole thing - do you make new friends? Because tomorrow they might be gone. And that has got to affect kids greatly.*

*A researcher came into our school and she found there was a lot of pride in our kids and she thought that the Virtual YMCA definitely made a difference in those kids' life. Because it wasn't just a place they could go to learn, they took a lot of pride in it. It was sort of like saying "that's my home", it was something that belonged to them.*

*It was also something that meant a lot to me. I was the chair of the program for many years, and my family was involved in it because they felt it made such an impact certainly on my kids and other kids. It also impacted the teachers who wanted to communicate with the Y staff, they wanted to know what the kids were doing and how they could help by sending homework or whatever. They were interested in knowing how the kids were in the Y. And I know if a child was misbehaving in the Y, it wasn't "Well that's an afterschool program." The whole school felt liked we all owned it and we were all in it together. So if a teacher came across a child doing something that they wouldn't*

*be doing during the regular day, they would feel quite comfortable to step in and say “that’s not the way we do things at (our school)”. So they really bought into the program and certainly had no problem having kids recommended for it. They really do think highly of the program. We all think highly of the program.*

### **Lasting Significance of the Virtual YMCA: Participant’s Stories**

Below is each of the six former participant’s narratives, which were created using the interview transcripts from their one on one conversation with me. Interviews followed an open-ended interview guide that aimed to understand the participant’s experience in the program, elicit memories of what has “stuck” with them since the program, and to get a better understanding of how this program was significant in their lives. It was clear when reviewing transcripts that each child had unique experiences in the Virtual YMCA that was best described and told from their own voice and perspective.

#### *Penny’s Story*

I first heard of Penny’s family when I began to review the registration forms with Carrie. Carrie had mentioned there were two sisters in the family who had both been enrolled in the program for several years and that their parents had been very supportive of the program.

I called their home and first spoke with Penny’s mother. When speaking about the Virtual YMCA, she was quite positive and asked that I say “hi” to Carrie for her. She explained to me that her oldest daughter, Penny, had enjoyed the program and now participated in a program for older grades at the school. However, her younger daughter, Bianca, did not enjoy the program as much and did not know if she would be interested in speaking with me. After a couple minutes of introducing the details of the study, she let

me speak to Penny directly. Penny was eager to meet with me and we made plans in a couple days to meet at her house for the interview.

Penny's family lived in a large, century old home that was in obvious need of repair. I knocked on the front door and Penny's sister, Bianca, answered and let me in. They were a white family, with both parents living at home with the two sisters. Their house was large but sparsely decorated. Penny and Bianca's mother sat at the kitchen table towards the back of the house and invited me in to sit down. Bianca told me that her sister wasn't home yet and introduced me to her two new kittens, which we played with while talking about her day and school. Penny came home shortly after with her father, and immediately showed me her new cell phone that she just got as a present for her birthday.

I invited Bianca to sit in and listen to the information about the project with her mom and sister. Penny eagerly began to recall details about the program and agreed to participate. Bianca left to watch television in the adjacent room while Penny and I sat at the table. Her mom stayed for the first half hour of the interview and then left to tidy up the house after that. We spoke easily back and forth about the Virtual YMCA and Penny's experience in it as the kittens continued to play at my feet.

*I was born in Toronto and I was there for a year, or two years, then we moved to Hamilton, to here (her current house) ten years ago. I live here with my parents and sister. I'm in grade six and I have always gone to the same school. I am funny, sociable, and fashionable and want to be a French teacher when I grow up. I met Carrie in grade four and she asked me to sign up for the Virtual Y. I now go to YouthCreate (an after*

school program for older grades) *which is awesome!* The Virtual Y and YouthCreate *are the only things I have done after school.*

The Virtual YMCA was *fun, fun, fun.* We used to do crafts and sometimes Carrie would surprise us and we would get something together or throw parties. There was great snacks, my favourite was nachos and one time we made cake and cupcakes! It was really fun. I remember that we used to do a lot of stuff like crafts. A lot of crafts. And at the end of the year we would always have a talent show and I used to dance in the talent show because I love drama. Carrie would try hard to get us on trips, but we didn't go on trips a lot. When my friends first told me about the Virtual YMCA in grade three before we left for the summer, they said "oh, we're going to go on lots of trips" and I was like "oh!" So it was disappointing in grade four when I got to the Virtual Y and looked at the calendar and there was no trips and I was like "where's all the trips?" We should have had more trips... because usually we were in the school the whole time, so it would have been nice to see where we would go and see Hamilton and all the good stuff.

It was very important to go on scheduled days because I would only get to see Carrie on those days and the rest of the days I had time off. I thought it was a little wacky doing three days in the week, it was a little crazy. I would have loved if it was five days to see Carrie and all my friends.

I had friends going into the Virtual Y and a lot of friends from my class, but sometimes there were some new friends from other grades. I definitely met kids from younger classes all the time... they're really cute! I remember first going to the YMCA that everybody was like "ohhhh, she's in the YMCA now" but at the end of it, they're like "hey Penny!" and it was awesome! The program was soooo different the second year.

*The same people were there, but the first year they didn't really think fond of me because they don't really know me, and then the next year they all knew me and it was fun. Like, the younger kids would be looking up to me and like "can you help me with that?" and I would say "sure" and my friends in the same grade, we would like talk all the time. I felt like I was like sort of being a role model or a leader sort of – like a mini-Carrie! It was fun.*

*The first year I was there, when I didn't know a lot of the kids, I remember my friend – she's gone now – me and her both wanted to be a teacher. I didn't know I wanted to be a French teacher, I just wanted to teach. And we would help the little kids, we would pretend to be a teacher and teach them stuff. I felt empowered! Because I remember like all the kids sitting there all in a row, like we would get a couple little kids just sitting down and looking up at me with their smiling faces and I would be like "Oh, I want to do this!" I remember Connor, he's a little guy. I remember that when he and my friend were playing the school game, he would be the first one to sit down. He's the first little kid that I made friends with and we're still friends now.*

*I still like helping kids and like lunch monitoring. I'm helping kids with their lunches and sometimes with their math and their work and school, on every single lunch. It's really fun! We like to think of ourselves as teachers.*

*I don't remember a lot about the leaders, I only remember Carrie. When someone got in trouble, we would usually just try and run away and Carrie would be like "no, no, no". She was strong, I liked her. She was funny. She would encourage us to pursue dreams and do stuff that we didn't want to do. Like I didn't want to dance in front of people and now I feel like I can dance in front of people!*



*I was very shy back in grade one to five... I loved dancing, but was very shy. And after the YMCA, I feel like I can get up and dance and I wouldn't care what people think. Like a couple weeks ago, I had my drama class and we were doing a performance. I was the first one to go up and do it! And if I didn't go to the Virtual YMCA, then I would have been the last person to do it. I would have been shy but like, I got an A on it! We would have free time at the Virtual YMCA and me and my friends would make up just like a dance and we could practice dances for the talent show, like three months away. Once Carrie found out what we were going to do at the end of the year, like if it was a trip or just doing the talent show, I would help get ready and be prepared. It was really fun. Carrie would obviously tell me first because I would love to prepare stuff!*

*We were very talky with each other, I used to tell her **everything** and she would be like "oh, that's awesome." Because I'm a huggable person and she's a huggable person too and whenever I came around I just hugged and was like "Hi, Carrie!" we had fun together. When we were in the gym Carrie would sometimes play because I like to jump rope and she would twirl the rope. I remember studying in math with her and doing timestables, Carrie taught me a trick with the 9's, like you can use your fingers. And I still use it, I use it a lot in my math class.*

*I actually remember making stories with my friends. One day when we were doing crafts, I suggested that we make a story and Carrie said, "Yea, that's awesome," and we did. I made a long story because I love writing stories, and I remember my friends making mermaid or princess stories. I made a mermaid story, it was really fun, and we shared them throughout our friends in the Virtual Y and around the school too*

*But all the leaders there are really friendly with us and they would push us a little bit. If we didn't want to do something, they would take a break for a little bit, then push us later. Like I remember my friend, she said "Oh how about we go teach" and I was like "no, no, no, no" but Carrie was right there and said that it's okay. And then after snack when my friend wanted to teach the kids and she was getting ready, Carrie was like "Okay, why don't you go try now?" and I was like "Ahhhh! You said I didn't have to do it!" and she said "well why don't you go any try (and teach others)" and then I tried and it was really, really fun! Back in grade five we were going to do a talent show and I didn't make, and Carrie was like "it's okay, you can try out next time" and I did at the end of this year in front of the school!*

*I found it difficult to get along with others before the Virtual Y. I think before people didn't know me a lot and I would only be hanging out with friends **in** my grade and then after the Virtual Y, I would be talking to kids from younger grades and older grades. It's definitely easy now to get along with others but my friends find it *hard* – they just stick with their friends in their grade. In the Virtual YMCA I learned the core values, respect, responsibility, honesty and caring. I remember that if you did any of the core values you would get a ticket and then at the end of the week it would be put in a cup with your name, and at the end of the week if you had enough tickets you win a prize. I think they've helped me in making friends, because there is people coming in the school and I would usually start with asking them "Hi, what's your name?" I would talk to them with respect a lot. I would make sure that they are okay.*

*It means to me now when I get older, like a lot older, if I didn't want to be a French teacher, I could become a dancer and that I would be less scared of people.*

*Because before the Virtual Y I was really scared to talk to people and now I'm really happy to talk to people! I'm trying to find dance classes in the City of Hamilton now. I think I am more open to what the teachers are going to say than other peers – usually they're just talking to their friends. I'm one of the smart people in the class! I am definitely more open to studying and learning new things. If you don't study, you won't get a good education and when you grow up, that's a good thing because you need to get a job. I didn't really care much about school before the Virtual Y. I used to hate school. I used to get picked on and bullied. Now I absolutely love it! Now I'm like really focused on getting good grades and my education.*

*I felt totally relaxed at the Virtual YMCA. I forget a lot of stuff but I wish to remember the Virtual YMCA when I grow up!*

#### *Bianca's Story*

When I finished interviewing Penny and was packing up, Bianca came back into the dining room. We spoke more about her new kittens and upcoming school week, and at that time, I asked her if she would be interested in interviewing with me too. She agreed and I came back two days later.

When I returned, Bianca was home alone with her father. He asked if I needed anything and then left for the backyard. Bianca and I sat at her dining room table and we spoke at length about her field trip at school that day. Her older sister came home eventually and passed in and out of the interview between the kitchen and the living room, where she was watching television. At the end of the interview, I thanked both

girls and Bianca hugged me eagerly and asked if I could come back the next day to visit again.

I saw both girls several times after that – to review the narratives and around school when I was meeting with other children. When I called the house about eight months later to check in and give the girls an update, they had informed me that their parents had since divorced and their mom moved out.

*I've lived here (in the same house) all my life. I am funny, happy, and bouncy and I don't know at all what I want to be when I grow up. My friend Richard, he was in the Virtual YMCA. Because he was like my best friend, I wanted to join so I could see him more often. I think I was in grade two when I joined – they had pieces of paper that you sign to register for it. I went for maybe two years, grade two and 3. We (her sister) started at the same time. It's the only one (after school program) I've been to.*

*I stopped going because I started to get a lot more homework and we have homework time, but I usually don't like doing homework in program. I don't like doing it at all! But I do it... sometimes-ish. I didn't usually do it there because I don't really like doing homework. I wasn't very good at it. I got a little better, but it's still kind of tricky. There was a homework place, and then there was another place where you could wait until other people are done homework. We played games... educational games. I remember once we played this game in the gym where there's an earth ball and first, before we played, we named all the countries. And then we had to bounce the ball to keep it up everywhere and say what country you touched. I don't know why but I kept touching Canada whenever I hit it! I remember I learned how to remember all the continents.*

*Sometimes I didn't like the educational games, but they still had a hint of fun. Like mints! You still have the chocolatey taste with the hint of mint.*

*The leaders were very, very nice. Carrie, Donnie, Kirsten... and there was Lorna. They were very nice. I remember I called Kirsten squeaky! I don't know why, it's just a nickname. And Carrie was always my buddy and she was always there for everybody and really nice. And Donnie, he is veeeeery nice, and he is very good at helping me draw. And Lorna, she's always there to help you with your homework. That's one thing she's very good at doing – homework. And helping you remember. They all worked together, but they are good at different things. They're very special and I spent a lot of time with them. Like Donnie, I would usually sit beside. And if Carrie was there, I would sit beside Donnie and Carrie. I would usually sit beside leaders, which is really hard to do because at snack time usually all the leaders seatings are taken. Carrie usually lets you help with the snack sometimes and it's really nice. And Kirsten, I will always remember her, she taught me how to do gimp! She taught me most of the hard-ishy things. And Donnie taught me how to draw better. And Lorna taught me how to try to stick to homework. When I was in grade three and we started doing times, I had no clue what I was doing! Lorna helped me with math because she was really good and she helped teach me a lot because we practiced it. Even though I didn't like doing homework there, she still made me. I wouldn't want to do it too much, I still don't, but I know I have to do it. They (the leaders) helped me, they didn't give me the answers – they helped. They always encouraged us and when we were done we could do fun things. Like Lorna taught me the finger trick! And that helped a lot because then I kind of memorized it and now I'm in*

*grade four and I'm doing division and that is a major part, so if you don't know times you are going to be very stuck. Now, I don't give up with homework but I take breaks.*

*I've known them (the leaders) for a while and you know when you walk across the street and somebody walks by you and you say "Hi how are you?", "Oh I'm great, good bye". You don't really remember them. You remember people when you spend more time with them. And the leaders are special because they are very nice and they take us on trips – like the bowling trip! I was on Donnie's team. We had lots of fun! Sometimes Kirsten would put some change in the songs booth. The leaders were like friends, sometimes teachers. But teacher because they would teach us stuff and they were always there. But teachers at school are teachers, they might want to do their job, but they don't like it. You should respect them because they are there to do their job, but not a lot of kids in my school like their job! The leaders were more playful. And really cheerful! Like younger teachers. Happy young teachers – like role models.*

*I remember all my friends at the Virtual YMCA and all the games and playing with my friend Richard because he's the one that made me join. I remember this one game that I really, really loved but we only did it once or twice – mafia. I liked it because I was usually the angel, or the mafia (special roles). Playing the game is really scary and nervewracking. I remember that we also did picture frames with two sticks here then two sticks there and they taught us that, and I still remember how to do it!*

*The Virtual YMCA was fun, educational, and really nice because the leaders are really funny and really lots of nice people. Except for one really mean person and his brother. Like when I was sitting by the door he would come up and knock the door and would run off. It wasn't very nice. When that happened, Carrie would come and told them*

*not to do that. And that helped a lot because I got to sit with Carrie. I knew they would always help.*

*A couple people there weren't very nice. They were bullies-ish and they bugged us a lot. It wasn't very nice. There were a certain amount of people that were kind of ruining it. The leaders taught us to ignore and they would be there to make sure they didn't do it. Once recently when I was with my friend Jennifer and we were talking at school recess all of the sudden Jason came up and was like "why are you two together" and I was like "just ignore him" and we walked away and he didn't bug us anymore.*

*Most of the kids were really, really nice. I liked it, it was nice to see my friends. I made new friends, like Ned who is one year older. I don't see him a lot now but he was always my friend and will still always be my friend. But not a lot of my friends went this year and I decided not to go. And I miss Carrie! I would have come back if Carrie was there and more of my friends. I always went (when registered) because I'm just like that! I'm not like missing days and I don't think it would be very nice if I never came because I signed up for it. And I'm supposed to go every day and I liked it, so why would I miss it?*

*It would be a lot different if there were different leaders each day. Because I kind of had to sort of bond with them and it's hard if you just have strangers come to the Virtual Y because you don't know them. It would be completely different.*

*I still remember respect, honesty, caring and responsibility (the core values). Sometimes when the group wasn't doing very good, we would do longer social skills lessons. I still use the social skills learned today, especially to relax and don't get so worked up! One time we were playing and I fell because of the ball and I got mad at the guy who kicked it and (demonstrates breathing deeply) I was like, "it's just a ball, walk*

*away". That was yesterday! Before, I probably would go tackle him! I remember once I was with my friend Richard and we had a fight and we were all mad at each other and then I remembered the Virtual Y and how much fun we had and thought that "Am I going to let this fight ruin all the fun we had together?" and I'm like "noooo" and was like "I'm sorry". Sometimes other kids get angry and they don't know how to handle it but it might be different if they went to the Virtual Y.*

*I'm kind of in the middle with getting along with others because if they are people I don't know, I'm kind of shy. But if they are people that I do know, yea, I'll get along with them fine! Like at a birthday party, and I don't know half of the kids there but the birthday person – I'll probably stay near the birthday person. But you should be with the group. Of course you might like it better by yourself but once you get to know them, which will only take a second...or a day, it would be worth it! So that would be it – they will meet each other which will be very embarrassing, but it's just that second and it won't last very long or happen again and then they can be friends. I learned to be a little more outgoing and meet new people at the Virtual YMCA and how to make new friends. I remember a new kid, Amber. They (other peers) would stay away from her. I don't know why, but I was like "hi, how are you?" and now we're friends! But they didn't. I don't know why, they just stuck to their old friends. I felt bad so I went and talked to her and now we're friends.*

*Hopefully I will remember the Virtual YMCA when I'm older especially the leaders and all the friends and all the art skills. I'm not sure if I'm going to go to college. It's a lot of school and you have to pay for school. When I grow up, I would like to be the*



*president! And make new rules. I already thought of it – “Vote for Bianca! I should help save all the animals and recycle paper!” That would be cool.*

### *George’s Story*

When reviewing the participant’s pool with Carrie and the principal, they both encouraged me to speak with George, a former participant who had been in the program for several years. They told me stories of George and his “quirks” and said that his mom was also very supportive of the program.

George’s mom readily spoke to me when I called the house. She confirmed George did used to participate in the program and mentioned that her younger daughter still participates. She told me about George and how he loved the Virtual YMCA and she wished he could still participate. Since “aging out” of the program, he has tried others, but has had negative experiences of being bullied in other programs. She asked if I could look into programs for George after school and in the summer.

She was a little confused when I told her about the study and wanting to interview George. She mentioned that George has autism and was not sure if he would be able to help me with anything, especially an interview. I convinced her to meet with me after school with George so I could explain the project to him.

We met later that week at his school about an hour after dismissal. George and his mom were from a Caucasian background and were happy to meet with me. They arrived in an older van on a stifling hot afternoon and we decided to sit on a bench in the shade at the park adjacent to the school. George was happy to be able to talk with me and immediately told me he would tell me everything he could remember. He answered

questions easily, but was also easily distracted by other kids on the playground, police presence at the school, and his mother, who would interject periodically throughout the interview with her opinion on the questions (at which point he would get upset and remind his mother I was there to talk to *him*). We continued to tell stories for over an hour until his sister was finished at the Virtual YMCA and his mom left to go pick her up. He told me to call him up anytime for more questions or if he could help again.

*There's sooooo much to tell! I'm an eleven year old boy who really likes to play video games. They are really fun. I just wish I could have more. I'm in grade six and have six teachers. I like French, language and math class but not science and art because art I fail at a lot and science is just really boring, I've taken French since fourth grade and I plan to take it in high school. Seven years I have been at this school, pretty much all my life except for daycare, but that's not important right now. Sometimes we moved, but in the house I live in now, we've lived for six years, since I was in grade 1. Yes, I like living here because there's so many people and everybody that my mom knew on the same street and like sometimes I get to go play with my niece – my sister and two nieces live next door. I live with my mom, my brother, and my sister. I'm awesome, cool, and loveable and my friends would say I'm cool, awesome, and smart but others would say I'm fat, a nerd, and stupid.*

*Yes school is important to me because you need an education to get a really good job, which is a video game tester, and I plan on doing well. Video game testers test them to see if there are any bugs or glitches and see if it's good enough to be released. I need to get a good education in math, science, and language. And in case it's a French game, I'll have to get a good education in French. I already am good at French! The other*

*reason why I love school is just because of the friends and I get to talk to people everyday!*

*My mom just signed the form for the Virtual YMCA and that's it, I didn't even know about it, my mom just got it on her own. I thought it was going to be fun and like, there's not really so much good shows in the afternoon til like 5-ish. So I thought I would go to see if it was fun and it was really fun, like gym, snack, and the leaders. I kept coming back because I got to see lots of new people and the leaders who were sometimes the same, but mostly new. I stopped going because I was too old for it. I tried Youthcreate, but it was really different. We got to play video games and learn nothing and I really hated it because there was way too many bullies, some really mean bullies and they made me feel upset. Pretty much, outside of school these days I pretty much do nothing. I'm in my house and either go on my computer, watch YouTube or just play video games. Sometimes I play with my brother. My mom rarely lets my friend come over because surprisingly the phone's always off. On weekends I pretty much just try and sleep in.*

*At the Virtual YMCA I felt really happy because I felt like there was no bullies – no one made fun of people. What I remember most is like, the nice leaders and students. And the snacks and the art. The leaders stand out for me because like, whenever there is something wrong, they always helped me. Like when I was really upset one day, they help it and they told me "it's over now, it's gone now" and "it won't happen again". They the students in the Virtual YMCA were really nice, and young. I barely see them at recess now because they're like way smaller than me and there's a different recess schedule for*

*everyone. It was equal we all got along the same (younger and older kids) as long as you knew what they liked.*

*My favourite story would kind of have to be like my first year when I did not know anyone there. Everyone wrote down their names and passed them around, then everyone had to guess who was who. It was like a little introduction, it was really nice because we were little and we got to meet each other! Sometimes I get to meet new people at school but I barely get new people in class. The Virtual YMCA was really fun, even if like the activities were boring, I would still like it 'cause I got to do it with other people.*

*I remember Carrie, Donnie, and Jennifer. Carrie's always the one, like the leader of all the leaders. Kind of like the leader of a band, the leader of a gangster group. She was like, really nice. We all made her things and gave it to her as memory gifts – I made her a nice “See you around” card. Donnie and I talked a lot! We talked because we have a certain thing in common, which was pokemon, and we would talk about it. Talk about which game and which starters we had. He was like my most favourite leader out of the bunch. He was the one who would help me the most, like he helped me with my work, homework, and stuff like that. He was fun, awesome, and really cool. Only Donnie had that in common with me, no other leaders or teachers. The relationship with the leaders was like a normal average family relationship, without all the fighting. Me and my sister fight at home.*

*With the other kids, I would say our relationship was really good, like we always talked. Like even if we didn't like something, you just say what they were saying and tell them that's so cool and stuff. Yes, it was different than the classroom because kids in my class really hate me for no apparent reason. Like I don't do nothing to them, but they still*

*treat me bad. Kids at the Virtual YMCA made me feel really good and I felt really relaxed. Like when someone is talking to you and you say you don't want to talk right now, the kids at the Virtual YMCA say "ok, talk when you want to". Then you get to relax. Not in the classroom, I say "Can I please have some space" and they're like "nooooo" and they still bother me. At home, no one treats me well and like I want to do something, like I want to change the channel on the tv for example, and no one will let me. There's not as much stuff to do at home and at the Virtual Y we compromised. Like we did half of one thing and half of another. Like if one person wanted to watch, for example, a super hero squad show and the other wanted to watch the avengers, you would just split it in half, fifteen minutes each.*

*It's easier to get along with others at the Virtual YMCA, everyone is your friend. But in school you had to earn everyone's trust to talk to them. Everyone trusted everyone at the Virtual YMCA. y peers in my grade have more friends than I do, 'cause I only got like seven or eight and they have like 20 or 30 friends. I be nice to everyone but yet I still only got like seven or 8. Yes, that would be nice if kids in my gradewent to the Virtual YMCA because we could get along better. Because like, Virtual Y completely changed me, so it could change them too! Like I usually don't like to talk and usually get mad a lot, which I still do but the Virtual Y got me talking and controlled my anger. 'Cause whenever I would get mad, they would just shake it out of me, literally. They said "don't get mad". I still get mad very easily today, last year (the year he transitioned into the older after school program) I could barely control my anger, it was the worst year of my life. No, I didn't get mad often at the Virtual Y, but at school people bully me and calling me names. I'm different from other kids because in this entire school, I'm the only*

*autistic kid that goes to a normal class. Yes, I like being who I am, because I'm different from everyone else. It's not like I'm HIV positive or something like that, but I'm different for the way I am! I was like the 150<sup>th</sup> child born, which means like every 150<sup>th</sup> child is autistic. Everyone has something different in them that makes them unique, like I have autism, others have glasses.*

*The Virtual YMCA meant fun and nice. It meant like, even if you didn't have that many friends, you still have people to talk to. Yes it was important in my life because like during the first year, I didn't know anyone and then as I gradually got older, I got more friends and people to talk to. In normal school, I have less and less. I would feel really sad if I missed a day because all the students get to do something and I get to do nothing.*

*No, I don't like homework, because you actually have to write after school and that's boring, no one likes to write after school. I asked for help if I needed help at the Virtual Y but other than that I do it on my own. It's not really important to do homework 'cause it really doesn't really help my grades, like it doesn't really matter. The leaders would encourage me to do homework but I would try not to, I would just hide it! I don't really know that much that they taught me in the Virtual YMCA homework time that I still use today.*

*I remember the core values, honesty, respect, caring... and responsibility. They teach us what to do and what not to do. Just at the Virtual Y 'cause in the classroom you just have to work, work, work, and work and not get up. I still use all four, like caring if some person fell one day, I would help them up. I learned to be supportive and to be caring and like that kind of stuff, but only use a little or not that much now.*

*On Fridays it was Club days and there was clubs and they were really fun. I did mostly gym club because I wanted to be active on Fridays. The other clubs didn't interest me too much.*

*Yes, I hope to remember the Virtual YMCA when I'm older because first of all, I'm autistic and I don't forget a thing! Second of all, it was an awesome program and I'm going to remember it forever and tell my kids, when I have kids. I will miss the leaders the most.*

#### *Dan's Story*

Dan was a former participant who had been involved in the program for a couple years. Carrie had told me that he was a troublemaker in the program, but turned into positive participant with some encouragement from staff. The principal was uncertain if it would be a successful interview because the family tended to be disconnected from the school, but I called regardless. When I attempted to contact Dan's family, it took several phone calls to reach his mom and when we spoke, she was very hesitant to meet with me. She explained several times that she does not do things like interviews, and does not let her son usually participate in activities like this.

However, when I mentioned that Carrie recommended I speak with her, she opened up and spoke fondly of Carrie, asking how she was. She explained that Carrie helped her and her son through some challenges at school, especially during a time when he was fighting with another boy. Dan's mom agreed to participate as a thank you to Carrie and she wanted me to tell Carrie. She insisted that we meet at the school and told

me that she did not want me to know her address or come to her house. We set up a time to meet and she also asked that I don't call her number again.

I met Dan and his mom at the school office. His mom was wearing traditional Sudanese wear and Dan was talking to other kids passing by in the hallway. We sat down in a meeting room close by and I explained the project. Dan's mom stated she had a background in law and was adamant that I did not record the interview. She also requested to read a copy of the questions and pointed to a couple that she did not want me to ask.

I took notes as I spoke with Dan, who seemed to bounce off the walls as we talked. He was very outgoing and his mom often told him to sit down and speak slowly. During some questions, she would interrupt in their native language, at what point he would usually stress that he wanted to tell his stories "his way". I took notes highlighting some key phrases and words Dan used to describe the people and his experience with the VY.

I am in *grade 4, going into grade 5*, and am *nine years old*. I am an *only child* and I live with my mom. My family is originally *from Sudan* but I was born in Canada. I like to play video games, be on the computer, and read books. I used to want to be a video game designer when I grow up, but now I'm not sure because that may be *too much work*.

I like to be funny and to be the centre of attention and have lots of friends. I have lived in different apartments through my life, but have *always lived in the same neighbourhood*. I like my neighbourhood because my school is there, but I don't like how



*many hobos are around and how many homeless people ask for money. I'm not sure if I want to live in this same neighbourhood when I grow up.*

I have gone to my school my whole life since Junior Kindergarten. My school is important to me and I like going there, even if I don't always think school itself is important. *I really like the reason why it's called Worthington and am proud to go to that school, especially since the new building was built because of the playground, the space, and all the technology in the classrooms.* I didn't really like the school in grade three because we were in a different school while they were rebuilding, and that school was *old, creepy, and haunted.*

I have participated in a couple programs out of school, *the Virtual YMCA, the Pinetree Community Centre Homework Club, and swimming lessons.* I started going to the Virtual YMCA in grade two when my classroom teacher suggested I go. I agreed because I wanted *something to do after school.* I came back to the program in grade 3, but left half way through the year because I didn't like being in the holding school, didn't like that we didn't have the gym as much, and thought some of the activities got boring because they weren't as active. I also didn't return in grade four when we came back to the new school *because Carrie, the old supervisor, wasn't returning.* I went to the Pinetree Homework Club on Mondays when I wasn't in the Virtual YMCA, but didn't like it as much *because they were too strict, suspended kids all the time, and the leaders made up rules so I always got in trouble.* On Wednesdays, the other day I wasn't in the Virtual YMCA, I would usually go home and play video games or go on the computer.

I liked going to the Virtual YMCA because it is was a place where *you could have fun and meet a lot of new people, instead of just going home after school.* When I'm old

enough, I hope to go to YouthCreate because it's an *upgraded version of the Virtual YMCA*. I felt *really comfortable and happy* when I was at the Virtual YMCA, and I don't feel that way at other programs. For example, the Virtual YMCA was *softer, friendlier, and you're more likely to have fun*, whereas at Pinetree they were *harder and stricter*. The Virtual YMCA also had *better games and leaders* which made the program more comfortable to be in. I was *bummed* if I had to miss a day because I really wanted to see what fun activities the staff had planned.

I remember most a lot of the activities planned at the Virtual YMCA, *like dance parties in the aerobics studio and dodgeball*. I also remember one specific day when a lot of kids were absent and the *leaders made it extra special, that was an epic time and one of the funnest programs of all times*. I also got to try new things in the clubs and the *best was cooking club*. I *didn't really like* cooking before the VY but now *I really like* cooking and like to do it at home. *I really want to join a cooking club when I'm old enough at Pinetree*.

The leaders were one of the highlights of the program for me, and *I remember the supervisor, Carrie, the most*. She helped me through *a lot of situations and cared about me*. Like one time my family from Sudan was coming to America for a trip and I had to miss the last day of program and I didn't get to go to the end of the year party. But Carrie cheered me up and gave me some of the gifts that the other kids were getting on their last day. She made me feel *really special, and I will always remember that*.

I remember all the leaders being *really funny, awesome, and really nice*, and I was sad when they were no longer with the program. Three stand out for me in particular, *Lorna, Carrie, and Adrian* because they were *fun and protective*. They were protective

*because they set boundaries and didn't let the kids do things that would get them in trouble, even though some of the kids wouldn't listen, the leaders would keep them safe and you would feel protected in program.* I also liked that you got to have the same leaders everyday. Teachers are different than the leaders because they *just blame students, give harsh consequences, and don't listen to what really happened. But leaders support you, believe in you, listen to you, and give you nicer consequences, like time outs.*

I also remember Carrie helped us out a lot. Instead of getting a lot of kids in trouble, she brought people together and we would work it out, rather than Pinetree where they would just suspend you for a long period of time or just ask you to leave the program. *Kids at the VY were never asked to leave,* and the leaders helped us and helped the parents. There were kids in the program that caused conflicts, and I wasn't friends with everyone. A lot of the kids were in different grades or younger, but I did meet some kids my age that are still my friends today. I even still talk to one family on facebook who are not at Worthington anymore.

I remember the leaders also helped us with our homework and I was able to learn better at the VY because *we learned through fun activities and games, instead of just sitting at a desk.* I remember they taught me the nine times tables, and I still use those today! I also remember the leaders helped us with social skills and to be *honest, respect, and to care for people if they are hurt.* The Virtual Y taught me *to keep trying over and over* and the leaders *really encouraged us to never give up.* I also learned that *mistakes are okay and you need to learn from your mistakes.*

The VY was an important place for me and I felt that the *education was better* than in the classroom because I got to *learn in different ways*, like in the gym or through social skills.

### *Geeman's Story*

I called Geeman's house and spoke with his mom, who was quite boisterous and open to me talking with her children. She mentioned she had six children, two of which were in the Virtual YMCA and met the criteria for participation in the study. We set up a time later that week for me to come by their apartment and explain the project to Geeman and Kelly.

Geeman lives in a high rise apartment building, and it was difficult to find parking among the busy streets. I buzzed to their apartment and his mom answered and let me come up. I took the elevator up several stories and walked down a dim hallway to their end apartment. The door was propped open and Geeman's mom answered when I knocked. It was a hot July day and there were several fans on in the apartment with windows opened. Geeman's family had cultural artifacts throughout their apartment that reflected their previous life in Africa. I was introduced to Geeman and Kelly and his mom left the room to talk on the telephone. We sat in a small living room that was open to the kitchen. There was one bedroom off the main room, with a couple more bedrooms down a small hallway.

Geeman volunteered to be interviewed first. There was lots of activity in the small apartment, with Kelly bouncing in and out of the room, his two year old brother playing nearby, and his mom talking loudly on the phone. Geeman was quiet and seemed shy,

fidgeting with a pen and the remote control nearby. However he considered each question, took pauses to think in between answers, and approached the interview with a sense of seriousness.

About half way through the interview, Geeman's mom brought us some water and asked if it was okay if she left to go pick up her younger son who was at the local community centre. She mentioned that her husband or older children would be home shortly if I needed anything.

*I like sports, I like to dance, and I'm lazy sometimes. I'm active, creative, and outgoing. I've lived in Africa and moved a lot of times there. We moved here (in Hamilton), we lived on the floor under us in 2003 or four when I was four... and then we moved to this floor. When we moved, I was sad, everything was different. I remember the animals in Africa, but when I came here, just cars! I like living in this building but not near that side, one block over. There's a lot of drugs and murders – CHCH (the news channel) came a lot of times to that side. When I grow up, I want to be a dancer and I don't think I'll stay here, I want to travel to see Africa and family.*

*I'm in grade five and sometimes like school to get a good education and because I want to learn a lot and be smart. But I don't like waking up early. I have four brothers and one sister and sometimes like having a big family. With my friends, I go to the park, play basketball, and race each other and ride bikes. My friends would describe me as sometimes cocky, active and awesome.*

*I like teachers who are active, nice to all the kids, likes to dance, and drives a nice car! Mr. B was my best teacher, he was a great artist, liked sports, and he understood kids – I don't think the other teachers have training for that because whenever they see a*

*child acting silly or doing something, they act like it's unordinary. Like, my friend, he has this talent to pop his eyeballs out of his eyes, and she (his teacher) didn't act like it was important.*

*I've gone to this school for six years and the Virtual Y for three years, grades one to 3. I stopped going because when I came to the school there was different programs and I went to Pinetree Community Centre. They had a dance instructor, we played in the gym, had great snacks and played the Wii. I went on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday to the Virtual Y. Monday I would practice and Wednesday I would have program at the church and learn about God, have fun, and play outside. The Virtual Y was my favourite because of all my friends. I remember the events, Santa's Chillzone, talent shows, dance, and the activities like gym, art, and helping us with our homework. I like fun and exciting things, I remember active parts of my life, those are fun times.*

*The leaders were nice, kind, and active. Trey, Austin, Lorna, and Carrie stand out because they spent time with me 'cause I was like, the best! One of them actually said that. I don't get scared, I was up for anything like at school we had a talent show and I danced. We did really good, we got a lot of high fives and I feel like the other people saw me. I'm competitive and I pretty much put on a show. In the first year of the Virtual Y me and my friend we danced for the first time. And then the second talent show was with my other friend. And then the last one was me and another friend. The relationship with the leaders started just because they enjoyed being with me but in the end we talked about everything and tell stories, like my friends. Yes, the leaders are different than teachers because I never had a leader yell at me for dancing around the class. The leaders would just dance with me!*

*I felt safe, calm, and special at the Virtual Y. They had rules and boundaries, you always knew what you could do and couldn't do. When I was sad or mad, they would talk it out with me. They treated me like I was an original. Whenever I wanted to dance or do something, they would let me show others. It feels different than at school. You can have fun at school, but then you have to concentrate on work.*

*I had lots of friends in the program, I was a role model for them. I would tell them what to do or if they would try to do something and get frustrated, I would tell them to try again next time. They thought I was older and fun, it was good, real fun. We would talk about what happened at school when it was snack time. When I started I made new friends and in the second year I made new friends too. In the third year, I just knew my friends. There was different kids that went, but now my friends too. Now, I have friends that are younger and older and some just because of the Virtual Y. I have enough friends; I think I have too much! I think it's easy to get along with others, but my friends don't. They try to be someone they are not, they would act like something... someone else. I don't do that because if I'm someone else, then that would be a lie, you just make up who you are, and I like who I am.*

*There would be circle, snack, social skills, and gym. My favourite part was social skills studies – we talked about what we did that was nice and what happened bad. One time during social skills, everyone would have a piece of paper on their locker and we would go around and write things about other kids, mine said “good dancer”, “funny”, and “fun.” It made me feel good. Today, it helps me to be caring... and to stand up for yourself! I forgot about clubs! I was in cooking club, you get to eat, and gym. We made cupcakes, smoothies and we made pudding! I sometimes cook at home now.*

I get homework now *but not really in grades one, 2, 3*. If I didn't have homework *I would play leapfrog or help someone else who had homework, or the leaders would give us new work*. I don't remember much that we learned. I find school *hard* and my friends find it *hard too* because *they're testing you! I don't enjoy school*.

The program *meant a lot, I can't explain, it just meant a lot. It was the time I felt appreciated*. It was important to go on my scheduled days *because I had to change a lot so I could go – I had to change my schedule, my playing outside schedule. I felt like I would miss something exciting if I couldn't go*. I stopped going *because in the last year, most of my friends disappeared and most of the leaders disappeared and I wanted to try something new. I just remember fun*.

### *Kelly's Story*

When I finished the interview with Geeman, he called for Kelly who came to sit on the couch with me. Geeman left the apartment but came back several times with different friends and boys of a similar age. Kelly was quiet at first and answered questions briefly. However, after we talked back and forth and told stories together, she opened up quickly and was thoughtful. She took time to answer questions but had obvious difficulty reflecting on complex questions or about program significance. She seemed to lack maturity to expand on answers and describe feelings and when asked questions that she struggled with, she would become frustrated and begin to act silly and make jokes.

*I loooooove cheese, all kinds, I like basketball, to be funny, and sometimes badminton*. My friends would describe me as *funny, good looking, and awesome* and I



think I'm *smart, cheese loving, and cute.... and funny!* I'm in grade *three* and *I'm smart.* We have a lot of kids in our family and yea, I'm the only girl. *It's fun* being the only girl because you get a lot of stuff, not boy stuff. At home, I like to watch tv and sometimes we like to go to the park. Sometimes my friends come and pick me up, and sometimes with my family, or we'll go to the park. Sometimes my friends come and pick me up, and sometimes with my family, or we'll go to my cousin's house. I've lived in Egypt, I was four then, my mom tells me a lot about it. Yes, family is important to me because I wouldn't want someone to say bad things about my family, that wouldn't make me feel good. I kind of like my neighbourhood 'cause at the street over there's shootings. When I grow up, I want to live in Australia and maybe go back to where I was born, because I was little back then. Maybe I'll have some friends to travel with. I also want to be a basketball player, or if that doesn't work out, maybe a doctor.

I have gone to my school now for five years. I don't like school, but I think it's important and do well because if there was no school, you wouldn't get an education and then you couldn't do nothing. I like my teacher because she's creative in art, just like me, and she's funny. I like all my teachers. The best teacher in the world would be exactly like me – they love cheese, it's their favourite food. And they would love being creative, like art, like reading, and just be themselves. My favourite subject is art, gym, computers... well, mostly all of them! I like books where there is adventure and lots of colours.

I'm friendly to my friends and I like to play tag with them and go to the park and the slides and swings. Sometimes I go to their house – I have one friend that I go to their house all the time.

*My brother first came to the Virtual YMCA and a couple of days after I went.*

When I didn't have the Virtual YMCA after school, I would *just go home with my other brother and my mom*. I was there *for grades one and two* and I stopped going *because it started after another community centre program after school and I didn't go back because Carrie wasn't there too and 'cause all the other people too didn't go back* (her friends). I would come back if *only the old leaders* were there.

At school, *I did skipping club, choir, track and field...* but Virtual YMCA was my favourite – *it's almost like a school club, but we do more than skipping*. The Virtual YMCA was really fun and we did a lot of fun things like gym and dodgeball, sometimes *Dr. dodgeball or kids vs. leaders*. I did *cooking club, and... I forget, it was a long time ago! I liked cooking and I like to make things, and sometimes we get to eat*. I liked gym and all the games, we did lots of things, there was nothing I didn't like. It was great, a place where you could be yourself. It's important *to be different, to be yourself because then you can be special*.

When I was there I felt *great and safe. Safe because we actually do things and there are rules and everyone follows them*. I feel safe too at school but not really the same safe *because school has a lot of kids and not all of them follow rules*. The program was special to me, *I don't know why, I can't explain*. Yes, it was important, *I kept on going every day*. I was upset if a day was missed *because I might miss something after school, something fun*.

We would do social skills, *and play games and talk*. I remember *caring, honest, respect, and be responsible*, I still use *caring and honest*. We would do homework and if *you didn't have any homework, the teachers would give you worksheets to complete, or*

*we would play games. I remember recreation time too and that it is fun and I would make stuff and be creative.*

*I remember Kirsten, Todd, Austin, and Leo... and I had Lorna. They were nice, helpful, and fun. Our relationship was close, they were my friends. We (the kids) were close too, some were my friends before. All of the other kids in the Virtual YMCA were my friends. When I'm older I want to remember all the leaders, all the fun times we had. I wish we could still do it all now!*

### DATA INTERPRETATION

After the transcripts were analyzed and transformed into narratives for each participant, each case was then interpreted with the aim to answer the research questions. Below are the relevant themes that emerged for each research question.

**Significance and Meaning: What is the significance and meaning of participation in the Virtual YMCA for participants? What factors influenced the extent to which former participants perceived their participation as significant?**

When reading the narratives, it is clear that lasting meaning and significance was present for the previous participants interviewed. As mentioned by the former principal, the Virtual YMCA helped a child feel connected to the school and have pride in his or her school. It provided a community hub where children could learn and recreate in one trusted space. Virtual YMCA ran in a location that parents saw as a safe haven in their community and allowed their child to participate, even if in nothing else. For a lot of the kids, this was one of the only places where they could have the option to form relationships, learn from peers and positive role models, and experience new opportunities. However when speaking with the children about the long term significance

of the program, it was clear that the program was significant in different ways for each child.

In general, the Virtual YMCA was a place to experience new opportunities, meet new people, and learn new skills through organized recreation. According to participants, the program was a diversion from the pressures of life, such as home and school, and provided them with learning and relationships that was unlike anything they have experienced before. For many participants, whose perception of their neighbourhood was unsafe and dangerous, the Virtual YMCA was a safe place to be and where parents could trust that their children were well supervised and protected. Since the program was free and participants did not have to go home after school and then come back for the program like many evening recreation programs, children were able to attend consistently and reliably. The program was a space that had high value for all participants and was remembered with fond feelings and memories.

However, it was also clear that long term meaning and significance was highly individualized, which explains the wide breadth of different types of meaning and significance identified by the children. The meaning placed on the program was woven into their other previous life experiences and experiences since their participation in the program. Each participant was able to link his/her participation in the program to their current life, behaviour, and attitudes and individually reflect on how they may be influenced by what they had experienced in the Virtual YMCA. Further, the Virtual YMCA program had a different significance for each participant. For Penny, the Virtual YMCA was a place for her to gain the confidence to now be a teacher and leader in her school and the ambition to be a French teacher when she grew up. The Virtual YMCA for

Bianca was a place where she could be with her friends after school and where she learned the value of meeting new people, being a part of a larger group, and to persevere with school work even when it's hard. George valued the program as one of the only places where he was not ostracized for his autism, felt valued and accepted by peers, and was able to learn skills to control his anger and interact with others positively. For Dan, the Virtual YMCA was a place where he could experience support and encouragement from adults and learned that school and learning could be fun. Geeman related the significance of the program to feelings of being appreciated by adults and valued for his talents and personality. Similarly, meaning for Kelly revolved around the opportunities the Virtual YMCA provided to experience new things and friendships.

The narratives clearly demonstrate that long term significance was quite personal and not always similar across peers. Meaning and significance therefore needs to be seen not just through the lens of categorization and generating similarities for all participants, but rather through the unique interactions between one's life (present and past) and program participation.

Although individualized, when examined collectively the narratives do point to two factors that appeared to influence the extent that participants perceived the Virtual YMCA program as significant. The first factor was the participant's involvement in other after school programs. As identified by the principal, it was uncommon for students at this school to be involved with much outside of school because families have a hard time trusting new places in their community. Indeed, for half of the participants interviewed, the VY was the only registered recreation program they had ever participated in (Penny, Bianca, George). For these three respondents, recalling their experience, feelings, and

participation in the VY seemed not only to be easier but these participants were more likely to describe the program using phrases such as “life altering” or “life changing.” Penny, Bianca, and George were able to recall details of games led, rules, and outcomes from up to four years prior. These three participants had not had the opportunity to experience anything like the activities or relationships they had experienced in the VY in any other setting. In addition, because they did not have the opportunity to develop relationships with non-family adults or peers in any other organized environment, it also seemed that the importance they placed on the relationships formed in VY was stronger than it was for the other participants. Conversely, for the three participants who had been involved in several programs through their life, the relationships and experiences in the VY seemed to be less impactful. For these participants, the VY seemed to be one of the many building blocks of previous experiences that got them to where they are today, as opposed to the others, whereby it was their only block of reference.

The second influencing factor was the state of the participant’s school and peer relationships. The social ties and friendships built within the program seemed of less importance to those participants who already had good social relationships before joining. For example Geeman and Kelly, who mentioned they had lots or “enough” friends, did not mention the peers or friends met in the Virtual YMCA as a significant aspect of the program. On the other hand, participants who had difficulty forming and maintaining relationships in the school and eagerly wanted more friends, like George and Penny who were bullied at school, talked of the ability and opportunity to feel a sense of belonging and friendship in the program as one of the most significant outcomes. A similar pattern could be seen with teacher and leader relationships. Participants who had very positive

relationships with teachers at their school, such as Kelly, saw the relationship with leaders as equally as meaningful as those with teachers. Conversely, those who had a poor experience with building relationships with teachers, like Dan and George who expressed difficulty relating to teachers, found their relationships with the leaders to be highly significant and very different.

**Significant Aspects: What aspects of the program were the most significant to participants?**

From the agency and school's perspective, a significant outcome and priority of the program in the short term was developing literacy, numeracy, and social skills. However, it was obvious that the significance and priority the participants placed on the program was quite different. For participants, the most meaningful and significant aspects of the program were the leaders, the environment and feelings experienced, the peers in the program, and the stability of the program.

*Program Leaders*

All participants and the former principal saw the leaders of the program as one of the most important and significant aspects of the Virtual YMCA program. The participants remembered a lot *about* the leaders including not only their names but also their personality traits, personal details like what they were studying at school, and stories about their interactions with the leaders, even years later. Some were even able to remember specific skills that individual leaders had taught them. For example, Bianca recalled, "*And Kirsten, I will always remember her, she taught me how to do gimp! (She taught me) most of the hard-ishy things. And Donnie taught me how to draw better. And Lorna taught me how to try to stick to homework.*" The participants also differentiated

between the leaders, remembering one leader for qualities or experiences that were different from what they remembered about another.

Although all of the leaders had a different significance for the children, the most powerful relationship that participants described was with the long time running program supervisor, Carrie. While other staff members signed contracts for three month periods for two to three days a week, Carrie was at the program five days a week, ten months of the year, and had been in the position for over three years. She often was available before and after program time for staff, students, and parents and was highly recognizable within the school.

Among the participants, Carrie played a range of roles. She was referred to as a supporter and encourager, a friend and teacher, and a protector and advocate. As a supporter and encourager, Carrie used her rapport with the children to give them confidence to try new things. She was able to listen to the children, determine what was important to them, and push them to take risks, try new opportunities, and pursue their dreams – often with great success and impact for the children. For example, Penny shared, *“She would encourage us to pursue dreams and do stuff that we didn’t want to do”* and further went on to discuss how Carrie pushed her to teach the younger children in program and gave her opportunities for leadership.

She was a constant supporter who was there for the children, able to listen and talk about anything, and help children through conflicts, like Geeman who mentioned *“When I was sad or mad, they (Carrie) would talk it out with me.”* As a friend and teacher, Carrie was able use her support and encouragement to instill lessons and promote skills in the children. They looked up to her as a role model, an older friend, and a fun



teacher who had answers to challenging life situations. She gave hugs when needed and consequences when deserved. As described by Dan, *“leaders support you, believe in you, listen to you, and give you nicer consequences, like time outs”* instead of suspensions.

With this guidance, the children also saw her as a protector and advocate. Many children described Carrie as being strong, fair, and respected, like Penny who shared, *“I don’t remember a lot about the leaders, I only remember Carrie. When someone got in trouble, we would usually just try and run away and Carrie would be like “no, no, no”. She was strong, I liked her.”* She set boundaries in the program and followed through with ensuring children abided by them. Some commented that this fostered a sense of safety and relaxation in the program, like Dan who said, *“even though some of the kids wouldn’t listen, the leaders would keep them safe and you would feel protected in program.”* Dan and his mom referred to Carrie several times as an advocate who spoke on behalf of the children and families to school officials, other families, and community services. She was seen as a compassionate community builder who brought people together to solve problems and conflicts and worked with children during challenging times, rather than just asking them to leave the program. Dan’s mom noted one time in particular when Dan and another boy got into a fight, and Carrie brought all parties together to resolve the conflict and ensure it doesn’t happen again. She also arranged meetings with the school to ensure they were aware. Dan best summed up Carrie with, *“I remember the supervisor, Carrie, the most. She helped me through a lot of situations and cared about me...she made me feel really special, and I will always remember that.”*

Beyond Carrie, the other staff members had more specialized roles and relationships with children. As Bianca described, *“They all worked together, but they are*

*good at different things. They're very special and I spent a lot of time with them.*" Each child seemed to have a leader that they connected with as a friend or role model, and for many this was the only adult relationship they had like this outside of school or family. For example, George connected with Donnie over their shared interest of Pokemon, which was significant because he had not experienced that connection with an adult or teacher before. For most children, leaders were viewed and classified differently than their parents or teachers. Compared to other adults in their lives, leaders were younger, more fun, and had more in common with them. For example, Bianca noted that the leaders were like *"friends, sometimes teachers. But teachers are teachers, they might want to do their job, but they don't like it. (The leaders) were more playful. And really cheerful! Like younger teachers. Happy young teachers – like role models."* These qualities and differences seemed to enhance the relationships the children had with the leaders and fostered a sense of trust, belonging, and connection. For example, Geeman said that the relationship with the leaders *"started just because they enjoyed being with me (but in the end) we talked about everything and tell stories, like my friends."* Kelly also mentioned her connection to the leaders and that their relationship was *"close, they were my friends."*

#### *Environment and Feelings*

The Virtual YMCA program environment and how that environment made the participants feel was another significant aspect of their program experience. The program was described by all six participants as *"fun,"* with several elaborating that it was safe and enjoyable. Some participants linked these feelings to the program leaders and their consistency with enforcing rules. For example, Kelly mentioned that she felt *"great and*

*safe... there are rules and everyone follows them;*” Dan spoke about how he felt “*really comfortable and happy...you would feel protected in program;*” and Geeman felt “*safe, calm, and special. They had rules and boundaries, you always knew what you could do and couldn’t do.*” This sense of safety and comfort led to other feelings, such as relaxation and a sense of belonging. Penny mentioned, “*I felt totally relaxed*” and George talked about how the kids at the Virtual YMCA “*made me feel really good and I felt really relaxed.*”

Another set of feelings were the feelings of being special, valued, and important. For example, opportunities to be a leader in the program resulted in feelings of empowerment for Penny: “*I felt like I was like sort of being a role model or a leader sort of – like a mini-Carrie! It was fun...I felt empowered!*” Program activities, such as talent shows and sharing also related to feelings of being original and special. Staff recognizing children for their talents and achievements in the program and school also led to feelings of pride and being appreciated and noticed, such as for Geeman who recalled that dancing in program was a time that “*I felt appreciated.*” Similarly, Kelly talked about the Virtual YMCA environment as “*a place where you could be yourself.*”

Recalling how they felt in the program was a powerful memory for the participants and quite often feelings could be recalled more often than specific skills or activities taught. Even when recalling negative experiences such as bullying, conflicts, or boring activities, the children still classified their feelings during those times as “good” feelings. For example, those who experienced conflicts made note of how they felt supported, comforted, safe, and relaxed because the leaders helped them through those times and made everything alright.

The environment and feelings were significant and important to the participants because it was different than how they felt at school and for some, at home. Some mentioned that school had similar rules, but since there were so many kids, they didn't feel as safe because not all the kids followed the rules and adults weren't always close by to help. Others, like George, mentioned that the feelings felt in program were also different than home because home had more conflicts, less choice in activities, and less freedom. Many could link the differences in feelings to the staff, program activities, and the program environment. Only Kelly, the youngest respondent, said that she did not feel differently in the program than she did at school and home.

#### *Relationships with Peers*

Many of the participants remembered the relationships they formed with peers at the Virtual YMCA. For participants, the VY was a place to meet new people and make new friendships, like Dan who noted that the program was a where *"you could have fun and meet a lot of new people, instead of just going home."* For some, this social environment was different than the environment of other places, like school. One way it was different was at the VY there seemed to be the assumption of friendship among the members of the Virtual YMCA. For example, George noted that the program *"meant fun and nice. It meant like, even if you didn't have that many friends, you still have people to talk to."* George also mentioned that Virtual YMCA peers were more likely to be your friends and be nice to you than peers in school. It was also easier to be friends with others and get along with people at program and that there was an immediate trust that everyone had with one another, whereas he had to earn the trust of kids at school in order to talk to them. New participants were welcomed into the group and despite initial feelings of

anxiety, were able to experience belonging and support from other peers in the program, like Penny who described her first year in the program: *“I remember first going to the YMCA that everybody was like “ohhhh, she’s in the YMCA now” but at the end of it, they’re like “hey Penny!” and it was awesome!”* This assumption of friendship carried on beyond the program. For example, some participants still classified children who were their friends in the Virtual YMCA as friends today, despite not being in the same grade or seeing them often.

The relationships the participants had with their peers added to the enjoyment of the program for many, such as for Geeman who mentioned, *“I had lots of friends, I was a role model for them.”* Others stated that they only returned year after year because they knew what kids were going to be in the program and they were able to keep the same friends over time. For George, these friendships and bonds were some of the only positive peer relationships he was able to experience during his eight years at school. He elaborated, *“I felt really happy because I felt like there was no bullies – no one made fun of people.”*

#### *Stability and Consistency*

The last significant aspect of the program was its stability and consistency. As mentioned by the principal, many of the children at this school did not experience much stability in their life and had difficulty forming attachments because people in their life came and went. Because of this, building and maintaining trust and relationships with the children was difficult. She pinpointed part of the success of the VY program in her school to its stability and sustainability over the years. Many of the children identified features of stability as important reasons why they liked the VY. For example, Penny spoke about

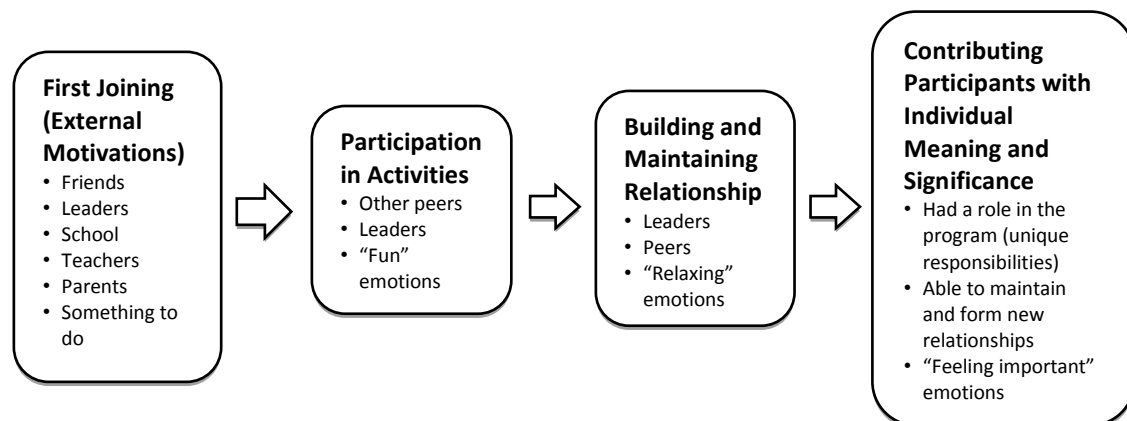
*"I thought it was a little wacky doing three days in the week, it was a little crazy. I would have loved if it was five days to see Carrie and all my friends."* Many liked that the program had the same group of kids every day and they knew who was going to be there, while others liked that they knew the leaders that were going to be there. When asked if program would have been different with new leaders each day, Bianca commented that *"It would be a lot different...Because I kind of had to sort of bond with them and it's hard if you just have strangers come to the Virtual Y because you don't know them. It would be completely different."*

Out of the four respondents who were eligible to return to the program in the 2010/2011 year, all chose *not* to attend because the leaders and participants had changed. This was especially true for Kelly: *"I was there for grades one and 2... I didn't go back because Carrie wasn't there too and 'cause all the other people too didn't go back;"* and Geeman: *"I stopped going because in the last year, most of my friends disappeared and most of the leaders disappeared."* Bianca similarly describe her reason for not returning was because her friends were not returning and Carrie would not be there. She noted that she would have come back *"if Carrie was there and more of my friends."* Dan even dropped out early in his last year because the program had changed locations when the school was being rebuilt, and he didn't want to attend the VY in a different location.

Overall, along with being the significant aspects of program participation, these aspects also appeared to be important motivators for the participants to continue to be involved in the program. Further, the program aspects seemed to change in importance during different phases of participation in the program, as illustrated in Figure 1. For example when first joining the VY, the leaders, peers, teachers and parents, and wanting

something to do were the most important aspect of the program and motivated the child to attend. However, as participants progressed, participation in activities with other peers, leaders, and the emotions derived (i.e. “fun”) became more significant. From there, children started to build and maintain relationships and looked forward to spending time with friends and leaders, and these aspects became the most significant, along with the feelings associated with the program (i.e. comfort, relaxation, support). In this phase, leaders began to take on new roles as encouragers, advocates, and friends for the children, beyond a play mate or staff member. For participants who were involved for a long period of time and experienced program stability, the opportunity to give back to younger program participants, maintain stable relationships, and experience new “good” emotions (i.e. sense of belonging, empowerment) became more significant.

Figure 1. *Significant program aspects throughout program involvement*



Not all participants interviewed progressed completely thorough this continuum. However it did seem like participants who were involved in the program longer did seem to progress further and experience the program in different ways. For example, George and Penny were the two participants who had been involved in the program the longest

and the only two who didn't return because they "aged out" of the program. They had both experienced involvement and investment in the Virtual YMCA and wanted to continue to contribute to the program in alternative ways, such as by helping younger kids, helping leaders, being role models, and they found importance in being friends with peers of all ages. Conversely, Dan and Kelly, who had participated for the least amount of time, were still focused on activities as the main importance and were just starting to build and maintain relationships with peers and leaders. They seemed to have had less of an investment in the program, and although they still found the program significant because it was fun and they liked the relationships they had started, they had more difficulty identifying lasting meaning and the significant aspects of the program. Bianca and Geeman were somewhere in between. They were more than superficially involved; they thought of the leaders as role models and the other kids in the program as valued friends. They also experienced feelings that were more complex than just "having fun".

**Perceived Changes: How do participants perceive that the program changed them?**

It was clear that the program did have lasting meaning and significance for previous participants. However, the interviews with the participants also showed that participants were also able to identify the ways that their time in the program continued to impact their lives today. This played out in different ways. For example, program impact came from learning new social skills or developed new friendships that they continued to draw upon. Participants also noted ways that the program had changed them, such as in their perception of self, attitudes, or behaviours. Finally, the program had introduced them to new interests, both recreationally and educationally, which they continued to pursue. However it is worth noting that one participant, Kelly, had difficulty



linking her participation in the program to present day, in terms of how she might be impacted because of her participation.

#### *New Social Skills and Friendships*

A primary goal of the VY program was to foster a positive social environment and build social skills that the participants could use in their everyday life. The respondents indicated that they saw the VY very much as a social place where positive behaviour and social skills were taught and reinforced, both through specific social skills instruction and through the role modeling of leaders. All of the participants interviewed could remember and recite the core values that guided the social skills curriculum delivered by the Virtual YMCA, with four remembering all four and the other two remembering three of the four. All could make connections between core values and how they currently made decisions, such as George who mentioned that he used the core values today to support and care for others. They considered the VY to be a setting in which positive social relationships were emphasized *more* than school, even though the principal confirmed that the school and teachers had implemented a curriculum called “Character Builds” within the school.

Further, many of the participants described how they still used the social skills they had learned in the program. These skills included assertiveness skills, interpersonal skills, conflict resolution skills, and coping skills. Assertiveness has been described by the participants as the confidence to speak up and stand up for oneself and one’s own beliefs, especially when it comes to taking risks and trying new things. This was especially evident in Penny who mentioned, “*Before the Virtual Y I was really scared to talk to people and now I’m really happy to talk to people!*” and how she has begun to put

herself into situations that she wasn't comfortable before, such as volunteering to perform in her drama class.

Interpersonal skills include the ability to interact positively with one another, and the participants mentioned they were still able to be supportive and caring of others, talk to new people, reach out to people, and make new friends. For example, Bianca described how she acted when a new kid came to the school, *"I was like 'hi, how are you?' and now we're friends... I learned to be a little more outgoing and meet new people (at the Virtual YMCA) and how to make new friends."* Further, several participants told stories of how the leaders helped them through problems and conflicts in the program and role modeled how to solve problems with others positively. Through this role modeling and guidance, they are able to make decisions today to resolve problems positively, like Bianca who was teaching her friends to ignore and walk away from people who were bothering them. Coping skills that were taught emphasized becoming more capable of regulating emotions and controlling impulses when upset. For example, Bianca described how she still used the coping skills she learned *"to relax and don't get so worked up,"* and that *"Sometimes (other kids) get angry and they don't know how to handle it but it might be different if they went to the Virtual Y."* Similarly, George noted how *"the Virtual Y completely changed me...I usually don't like to talk and usually get mad a lot, which I still do but the Virtual Y got me talking and controlled my anger."*

#### *Changes in Self-Perception, Attitudes, and Behaviours*

In addition to social skills, many of the respondents also described how the VY changed their internal attitudes or self-perception, which they have carried with them into other settings and relationships. For example, Penny spoke about how she was shy before

the Virtual YMCA, but was now open to meeting new people, speaking up, and trying new things: *“I was very shy back in grade one to five...And after the YMCA, I feel like I can get up and dance and I wouldn’t care what people think.”*

Others mentioned attitude or behaviour changes towards academics, like Dan who described how he now knows that learning can sometimes be fun. Penny also described how her attitude towards school has changed: *“I didn’t really care much...I used to hate school. I used to get picked on and bullied. Now I absolutely love it! Now I’m like really focused on getting good grades and my education.”* Other participants experienced a change in their academic identity, like Penny who said, *“(Now) I’m one of the smart people in the class!”* A couple participants also mentioned changes in attitudes relating to perseverance. For example, Bianca noted that with her homework, now *“I don’t give up but I take breaks.”* Similarly, Dan described how the Virtual Y taught him *“to keep trying over and over...mistakes are okay and you need to learn from your mistakes.”*

#### *Continued Use of Recreation and Education Skills*

Despite the VY spending a large component of the routine on academic and recreation skills, children had a hard time connecting the content of what they learned in academics and recreation to their everyday lives. For example, while all respondents were able to reference specific games they learned at the VY, many mentioned they were unable to teach or still play these games with others because they required too many people. Some were able to recall tangible “tricks” with their homework that still helped them today, like Dan, Bianca, and Penny who learned how to use his/her fingers to solve multiplication tables from staff. Others were able to recall tangible skills that help them in gym and recreation pursuits, such as Bianca who said that she was better at drawing,

shading, and shooting a basketball. However in general, the content of the academic and recreation 'lessons' of the VY seemed to have relatively little significance to former participants. Instead, respondents spoke instead of having learned an appreciation for academics or recreation pursuits that they did not have before, such as Dan who learned that he enjoys cooking and now wants to join a cooking club and Penny who was searching for dance classes offered by the City.

### **Conclusion**

It was known all along that the program achieved many short term goals and successes for children attending. However for children who did not return to the program, it was unknown whether and how any of those short term successes manifested into long term meaning and significance. Through interviews with the former principal and six previous participants of the Virtual YMCA who have been out of the program for at least a year, it was clear that the program is able to achieve long term meaning and significance. The Virtual YMCA was a place to experience new opportunities, meet new people, and learn new skills. However the specific meaning and significance of the program was highly personalized and individualized based on the participants' previous experiences and experiences since the Virtual YMCA. There were several aspects of the program that were identified as contributing to the long term meaning, including the leaders, the environment and feelings, the other peers in the program, and the stability of the program. Long term impacts, in terms of ways that the program 'changed' participants, were also noted by former participants. These impacts included increased social skills and friendships, changes in self-perception, attitudes and behaviours, and continued use of recreation and education skills.

By identifying that after school programs can achieve long term impacts and be significant for participants years later, the potential for after school programs to instill protective factors for children and help them overcome risks is immense. Even if a child is involved with a program for one eight-month period, the data suggest that the child can still derive meaning and gain long term impacts from this participation. Discussion and implications for the field of after school programming are provided in Chapter Five.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study is able to provide only a small insight into the long term meaning and significance that children and youth derive from participation in after school programs. Despite the limitations of this study and the resulting small sample size, the results are still able to expand and contribute to a field of research and practice that is so often left uninvestigated and researched. With such limited funding and program investments, after school programs rarely have the additional funds and administration to conduct research on participant experience and program outcomes (Clutterbuck & Howarth, 2008). And quite often the research that is completed focuses on measuring very specific short term gains, in order to maintain and justify the financial grants and investments directed to the program.

However, after my experience through this project in contacting families, building rapport and trust, and using retrospective research with children and youth, I am now recognizing the challenges with researching lasting impacts for marginalized children and youth in depth. In this chapter, I discuss what can be learned from this study, with three different audiences in mind. In the first section, I discuss the next steps and implications for future research. This discussion is followed by further implications of the findings for practitioners and organizations who are currently implementing after school programs. In the last section, I discuss implications of the findings beyond direct program implementation and consider impacts for the future of after school programs and funders.

### **Further Discussion for Researchers: Where Do We Go From Here**

There are several areas of discussion raised from this study for researchers hoping to build upon the findings noted and continue to contribute to the field of after school

programs. Further research will assist practitioners in better understanding how programs affect participants and assist funders in making decisions when choosing effective programs, rather than just low cost programs.

### *Next Steps*

There were several challenges noted through this study, leaving some unanswered questions and obvious study limitations and I see value in having this project extended in order to address these challenges directly. One of the most significant limitations was the limited data outside the children and principal interviews that was available. This led to only partial conclusions and questions regarding the generalizability of the findings for all former participants and additional information and data could help to meaningfully build on the initial findings. Although the interview pool was exhausted from Worthington School from the 2008 to 2010 school years, conducting similar interviews from former participants who attended the program at other schools could be undertaken. Interviewing children from other schools would also help to understand the role of Carrie, and if children from other programs experienced a similar connection to the program supervisor, or if this was unique to Worthington's program.

Transiency of the former participants, and locating their whereabouts today, proved to be an immense challenge and limitation of the study. This led to only interviewing children who were out of the program for one to two years. There is a need to understand if program significance and meaning extends beyond one or two years and carries with the child into adolescence.

Given the limitations in interviewing children, especially through retrospective research, broadening the interviews to include teachers and parents would also help to

inform whether the long term impacts extend beyond the individual's perception and recollection. Additional indicators, such as attendance records, report cards, and standardized tests administered through the school could help us better understand if these students, compared to their peers, are still considered "at risk" today.

As also noted in the study's limitations, the accounts provided by the children are primarily positive. This is not at all reflective of every former participant's experience in the program. Although some of these limitations are inherent in the research design (i.e. participant age and use of retrospective research), a broader understanding could be attained through altering the sampling criteria. For this study, only children who were still at Worthington and who participated in the program for a complete year were considered. However, it would be worthwhile to also interview children who have experienced mobility (have moved schools) and who did not complete a full year of the program (dropped out early), to understand if they experienced any long term significance or meaning from their participation in the program. Understanding how their experience is different from the other grouping of participants would give a different perspective to long term impacts and help researchers understand more deeply the range of long term significance.

In addition to the next steps for future research related to this project, other discussions can be generated for researchers who are studying the field of after school programs. The challenge of studying marginalized populations will be discussed below, as well as some areas to consider for future research including expanding on what program aspects are important based on a participant's stage of participation, the potential of protective relationships with program leaders, evaluating "the emotional



environment”, exploring individual attributes as they relate to program participation, and exploring the cost investment in after school programs versus long term outcomes achieved.

*Challenge of Conducting Research with Marginalized Populations*

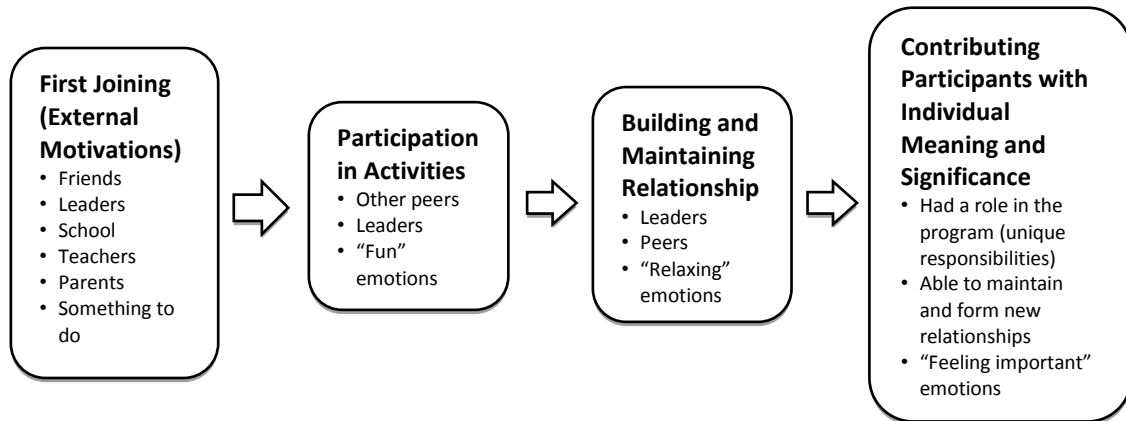
There has been some research that investigates the barriers to studying marginalized populations and how to increase research engagement with those who are traditionally disenfranchised. Perceptions of trust and mistrust of scientific investigators, government, and academic institutions continue to be a primary barrier to recruitment (Yancey, Ortega, & Kumanyika, 2006). The informed consent process has been reported by some participants as relinquishing rather than protecting rights (Corbie-Smith, Thomas, Williams & Moody-Ayers, 1999) and fears of mistreatment and exploitation have also been reported (Corbie-Smith, Thomas, & St. George, 2002). Participants have also raised concerns that research data will be used to enhance the researcher’s career and portray the community in a negative light, rather than address community needs (Gooden, Carter-Edwards, Hoyo, Akbar, & Cleveland, 2005). A common approach to building trust and alleviating attitudinal barriers is to work through community based organizations and already established relationships (Ashing-Giwa, Padilla, Tejero, & Kim, 2004; Gauthier & Clarke, 1999; Wyatt, Diekelmann, Henderson, Andrew, & Billingsly, 2003). In the case of this study, this study, building on YMCA’s and school’s relationship with the child was a strategy that seemed to have positive results , but was not enough to ensure participation from families. Nicolson et al. (2011) added that it is this distrust, along with economic disadvantages, lack of awareness about research studies, and communication barriers that continue to impede recruitment and retention of marginalized participants.

We also need to acknowledge that there is an implicit power imbalance between marginalized groups and academic environments and initiatives, and this power can immediately affect recruitment and data collected (Marshall & Batten, 2004).

*The Role of Phase and Duration of Program Participation*

More research is also required to better understand how duration of participation in a program impacts the likelihood that long term outcomes are achieved. How many hours, months, or years of involvement are needed for a program to become significant? The participants in this study participated in a program that involved 2.5 hours of program time, three days a week from October to June. Most of the participants had been involved in the program for at least two years. However, questions still remain whether the participants would have the same lasting meaning after only a year, or if several years of involvement are needed to achieve lasting results.

It was also clear when speaking with the children that there were different phases of involvement in the program. These phases were often driven by various motivators. Below is Figure 2, first presented in the findings, which outlines how program aspects changed in importance for participants depending on their phase and duration of participation. All of the participants reached the phase that involved building and maintaining relationships with the leaders and peers. Several of the more long term participants began to contribute back to the program through leadership and mentoring, while also continuing to be supported by the leaders as they grew up and experienced new emotions, opportunities, and friendships.

Figure 2. *Significant program aspects throughout program involvement*

However with such a small study sample, it is impossible to know if every participant experiences these same phases and motivators or if it was unique to this cohort of children. Are there lasting impacts for children who are only briefly involved and progress minimally through the continuum? Further research can help practitioners understand what motivates marginalized children to continue to participate in an after school program and to help meet those motivators to ensure children stay engaged. Further investigation can also help determine the level of a participant's engagement and whether the level of involvement influences the lasting impact and meaning attributed to the program.

#### *The Potential of Protective, Program Leader Relationships*

In the literature review, it was discussed how caring adult relationships is a strong protective factor for children and youth who are at risk for negative development. Previous research has also shown that recreation and after school programs have the potential of providing an environment for adult and child relationships to be formed and maintained. In this study, it was reinforced that participants placed a high value and significance on the adult leaders in the program and the impact of those relationships was

still present one to two years after program participation. However, what is unknown is how to measure and evaluate the quality of these relationships. When do relationships move from a supervisory role to a caring adult relationship? How do you know when relationships reach a point where they begin to be protective for the children? How long do relationships need to be maintained in order to have long term impacts? What would the field of after school programs look like if relationship-building was the main priority?

Relationships with program staff were one of the most significant parts of the Virtual YMCA for previous participants. Program leaders were identified as supporters, educators, encouragers, friends, protectors, and advocates. Although relationships were highly individualized between the children and staff, it was clear that the relationships formed over time were a key motivation for the children to keep returning to the program, to learn, and to take on new opportunities offered through the program. Literature has shown that relationships can be an important protective factor for positive development as they help youth avoid risky behaviours, pursue desirable opportunities, and recover from negative experiences (Furstenberg, 1993; Tierney & Grossman, 1995; Werner, 1993). Werner (1993) also found that adult relationships outside of one's family help youth to feel special, promotes self-esteem, and builds self-efficacy through unconditional acceptance. These findings support the "adult support" framework and previous literature emphasizing the importance of meaningful adult relationships.

#### *Measuring the "Emotional Environment"*

Another program component that had lasting significance for the participants was the way the program made them feel. These feelings were different than in other environments and in this study, the feelings paralleled the descriptions of the significance

and impact of the program. These findings suggest that feelings of safety, comfort and relaxation are needed to form relationships, try new opportunities, and learn new skills. However, further research is required to help evaluate the role of a positive “emotional environment” in contributing to the achievement of long term impacts. Research can also help determine if participants who do not elicit any long term meaning from program participation or quit prematurely were involved in a program that had a different emotional environment.

If there is a difference, then perhaps participant program evaluations can move beyond measuring just “satisfaction” or whether the program is “fun” and rather measure a program’s success by how participants feel when involved. Program leaders can also use this information to measure all participants’ emotional response to the environment. Those children who are not feeling positive emotions while involved (relaxation, safe, comfortable) and who might be at risk for quitting or not benefiting long term from the program can then be given additional supports to hopefully become more engaged.

#### *Outcomes for Ethno-racial and Immigrant Minority Children and Youth*

It was clear when reading the narratives that lasting meaning was highly individualized. Participants derived meaning from the program based on not only their level of participation but also their personal history, background, and life circumstances. However, this study did not explore the influence of the participant’s socioeconomic and ethno-racial background on the meaning they derived from the program, even though demographic data indicates that the neighbourhood in which the participants live is one of the highest in the city for new immigrants and has a much higher proportion of residents who self-identify as being a visible minority compared to the rest of the city

(City of Hamilton, 2007). In this study, half of the participants were visible minorities who emigrated to Canada with their parents. Thus, we can expect that ethno-racial background and immigration history would have an effect on how a participant derives long term significance from program participation.

However, the narratives gathered in this study do not capture the ways that socioeconomic or ethno-racial background impact program participation. There are some possible explanations for this. One is that the Virtual YMCA did not intentionally account for or specifically address the ways that a student's ethno-racial background might interact with the program or participation. They instead strived to create an environment of belonging with a "diversity-blind" approach, which meant embracing each other's differences and understanding who one another was regardless of race and ethnicity. Leaders, when possible, represented the ethno-racial makeup of the students, but more often than not this was not addressed or done in a deliberate way. Given this context for this study, understanding how personal experiences were influenced by ones culture, race, and ethnicity was not specifically researched.

A second explanation relates to the age and developmental maturity of the study participants. In the interviews, the respondents did not give much reflection or attention to their background, culture, or family history, and when asked they only provided limited insight and stories. I believe that their immaturity and age contributed to a lack of personal awareness and reflection, and in turn limited their ability to understand the influence of their socioeconomic or ethno-racial identity, life experiences, and individual circumstances on the meaning they derived from their participation in the Virtual YMCA. However, this should not imply that the influence of one's ethno-racial background was

not present for the children. These attributes and circumstances are deeply imbedded in our lives and how we perceive and interact with the world. This would have undoubtedly influenced how the Virtual YMCA was experienced and any lasting meaning which was derived.

Research about program participation and outcomes for immigrant and ethno-racial minority children and youth is limited, but it is clear that this population faces complex barriers and unique challenges that can impede community engagement and successful participation (Cooper, 2008). For example, immigrant and ethno-racial minority children and youth are more likely to live in low income households than other Canadian children (Campaign 2000, 2007; Milan & Tran, 2004). Poverty among immigrants is highly linked to higher rates of unemployment, low wages, and low skilled occupations. Even Canadian born ethno-racial men face disadvantages due to workforce barriers (Cooper, 2008). Research also shows that ethno-racial minority groups and immigrants continue to experience racism, discrimination, and unfair treatment in Canada (Badets, Chard, & Levett, 2003). This racism is even pervasive in the lives of school aged youth who report facing discrimination at school and experiencing ethnically based bullying and harassment (Hanvey & Kunz, 2000). Racism, discrimination, and bullying present huge obstacles to minority populations in terms of being engaged in their schools and communities and experiencing a sense of belonging and acceptance. Racism and discrimination also present challenges for children to develop positive identities, maintain high self-esteem, and secure positive peer relationships (Cooper, 2008).

Further, critical race theorists are specifically critical of the “diversity-blind” approach to policy making and programming, noting that it has real implications and

consequences for fields such as recreation and youth work. As described by Glover (2007), the absence of attention to diversity and in particular racial identity, “is supported by its liberal proponents as a commitment to transcend race. Race becomes a “non-issue” through color-blind policies that focus on merit. However, critical race theorists note such policies fail to alter the significance of race in everyday life” (p. 196). Glover further noted that ironically, colour-blind policies set an environment for further inequalities by refusing to “see” colour and perspectives which are non-dominant, effectively circumventing any consideration of racial implications on institutional policies and practices.

The lack of attention in recreation and youth work to considering non-dominant perspectives has also been traced to the theoretical framework that underpins much of the work in this field. For example, Cooper (2008), referencing Quiroz-Martinez et al. (2004) explained:

In general, the positive youth development framework has paid little attention to the ways in which discrimination, racism, and other barriers affect ethno-racial minority youth. The places where youth development occurs—schools, community organizations, entry-level employment, formal politics—may simply disregard issues of race, identity, and empowerment; at worst, they themselves be the sources of racism and, therefore, of youth disempowerment and disaffection (p. 18).

Although a number of promising practices can be highlighted, research that appreciates the lens of ethno-racial youth in recreation and positive youth development is crucial, especially given the prevalence and linkage of poverty, ethno-racial minorities, and their



disengagement. This gap in research and understanding is unmistakable and greater investigation from a critical race perspective is pressing.

#### *Cost Investment vs. Outcomes*

Another concern for funders and program sustainability is determining how much of a financial investment is required to achieve the kinds of long term outcomes that after school practitioners and policy-makers are looking for. With such a wide range of after school programs offered by many different types of service providers (i.e. non-profit, private, municipalities, churches) and with a range of fees (i.e. from free to a daily/weekly charge), after school program costs can vary dramatically. In response, funders often have lengthy application processes to determine the best service providers to deliver programs. They also often fund programs for only a portion of the required operating costs or for a limited time in order to “spread the wealth” across applicants. Given this variability, it is worth investigating the relationship between program impact and program investment, to determine how much of an investment per child is required to see long term impacts. For the Virtual YMCA, one thousand dollars is invested per child per school year to participate. But can long term significance and meaning be achieved at a lower cost? Or does more money for a longer period of time achieve even greater outcomes?

#### **Further Discussion for Practitioners: What Have We Learned**

I think all practitioners would agree that the hope of program participation is that the child will be influenced and grow in order to do better or be better in the future. When speaking with the children and former principal, it was clear that there were some key program features of the Virtual YMCA that helped to facilitate long term significance. As

described in the literature review, there are several listings of best practices in the field of after school programs (Miller, 2003). However, by analyzing firsthand accounts of individual's lasting meaning and perceived significance, we can begin to better understand how program features and design can enhance the individual's experience and ability to derive lasting benefits. The findings of this study drew attention to the importance of the following program features: (a) program leader selection and consistency; (b) program peers; (c) sustainable funding; (d) programs working in collaboration with schools; (e) "all-in-one" programs; and (f) program goals that focus on socialization, behaviours, and attitudes.

#### *Program Leader Selection and Consistency*

Adult relationships are a strong protective factor as identified by previous literature (Kahne et al., 2001) and it is documented in literature and in this study that after school programs are able to help foster and provide opportunities for such relationships. In response, after school program providers should take measures to develop and implement programs that intentionally foster and promote relationships with program leaders. Features of effective program leaders that were identified by the children interviewed included those who were fun, younger than teachers, able to set boundaries and ensure other children follow rules, able to communicate with children, teachers, and parents, and who have common interests with the children. Appropriate staff training, standards for communication, and proper hiring will help program leaders achieve these qualities.

Relationships also were not formed right away, and it took consistent and frequent contact between the children and the leaders for trust to be formed and for relationships

to develop. For the Virtual YMCA, program leader schedules matched the children's schedules with staff hired to work Monday, Wednesday, Fridays or Tuesday, Thursday, Fridays for three month blocks at a time (to follow the college/University school calendar). Supervisors were also chosen in part because they were available all five days and for the whole program year. Where possible, staff and leaders were kept at the same school for the duration of their employment, and some leaders maintained their involvement for over four years. This organizational policy and the consistency it fostered among program leaders had obvious positive benefits for the participants, their families, and the school and program providers need to ensure their staff team is consistent and that staff are committed for long periods of time.

#### *Program Peers*

Peer relationships also had a significant long term impact on program participants. For some, friendships from the program continued to be maintained. For others, the experience of the peer relationships during the program led to a change in friendship attitudes, behaviours, and skills. Three features enhanced these peer relationships and long term significance. One feature was that peers were from the same school and neighbourhood, which meant that friendships could be reinforced during off-program hours. A second was that students had interactions and were able to form friendship with children from older and/or younger grades. Third, participants were able to attend on set days with each other and could predict what children were scheduled to attend each day.

#### *Sustainable Funding*

Programs targeting students and families living in neighbourhoods with high rates of poverty and transiency need to ensure that funding is sustainable, as much of the work

of organizations involves gaining the community's trust. For a community that is so used to transiency in services and participates scarcely, trust is essential in reaching disconnected families and encouraging participation. Therefore, funders and practitioners should strive to support and deliver programs for children in the same location for years. For funders, this might mean pooling resources to support fewer programs in the long term rather than more programs for the short term. In order to ensure that reputable and "effective" programs are chosen, a consensus on program quality features and program evaluation needs to be reached within the field.

#### *Programs Working in Collaboration with Schools*

For many of the families in this community, participation of children in programs outside of school was limited, which was also seen with the participants in this study. Programs aiming to serve children in these communities may be more effective when run in collaboration and cooperation with local schools. By the Virtual YMCA being offered at the school and with support from school personnel, parents had an implicit trust in the program and parents were willing to register their child. The school personnel were able to help promote the program, identify and recommend the most suitable students, and facilitate communication between the program and families. This partnership also allowed teachers and program leaders the opportunity to work together to support the children and reinforce areas that were a priority for school and social success. Children received consistent messaging and support in the same, secure environment. Lastly, this collaboration, combined with requiring parents to pick up from the program each day, helped to create a link between the families and the school. For those families who were

marginalized and considered at risk because of disconnection with the community, this link may be a vital for supporting families and ultimately, community development.

*“All in One” Programs for Marginalized Children*

Recognizing that the children in this study participated in a low number of out of school activities, it becomes more important that programs have diverse, “all encompassing” goals and provide children with as many opportunities as possible. Instead of stakeholders and school boards supporting programs that just have one focus (i.e. reading programs, sports programs, homework tutoring programs, nutrition programs), preference should be given to those that provide several opportunities in one place for socialization, recreation skill development, nutrition, and homework help. This will help ensure that even if participants are involved with only the one program throughout childhood, they are receiving as many opportunities for positive growth and development as possible.

*Goals that Focus on Socialization, Attitudes, and Behaviours*

It has also become a trend in the field to focus on skill building programs that reinforce and show development in tangible skills (i.e. reading levels, recreation skills, etc.). However it is apparent after interviewing the children it were the social skills, behaviours, and attitudes that had the lasting impact. According to the literature, pro-social behaviours are essential for successful adult adaptation (World Health Organization, 1999; Miller, 2003). Interestingly, out of the World Health Organization’s five basic areas of life skills relevant across all cultures, all the skills are based on social behaviours and attitudes (decision making skills, creative thinking skills, communication skills, self-awareness skills, and coping skills), not tangible skills like reading and writing

proficiency. Therefore it is important that programs aim to achieve goals relating to increasing socialization opportunities to reinforce and change attitudes and self-perception to influence positive behaviours and decision making.

### **Further Discussion for Funders and Decision Makers: How Can We Do Better**

One thing that was clear was that the long term impacts reported by the participants were primarily present because of the stability of the Virtual YMCA program, as well as its principles and program model that embraced consistency and sustainability. However, stability and consistency are far from the norm in after school programming and community recreation. More often than not, community agencies that focus on serving marginalized families and children rely on funding from outside sources to run programs free of cost for marginalized families and children. The funding agencies that support community recreation programs range from federal and provincial governments to local funding agencies to private investors. Each funder has different funding cycles (providing funds from anywhere from six months to five years), different priorities for projects to secure funding, specific money allotment requirements, and different reporting structures and timelines. This reliance on short term, external grant funding immediately reduces the likelihood of stability and consistency (Social Planning Council of Ottawa, 2005).

It wasn't always this way. In the 1990s, agencies used to be funded not on a per-program basis but based on their mission and core mandate, which left organizations with "a degree of autonomy in directing their own affairs" (Clutterbuck & Howarth, 2008, p. 38). However, most agencies have lost this core funding as the federal government downloaded their services to provincial, municipal, and community agencies. This now

leaves many community agencies to “apply for project funding targeted to certain priority areas or to enter into purchase-of-service contracts with government ministries and departments for delivery of specified programs” (Scott, 2003, p. 8). Many organizations that survived government funding cutbacks of the 1990s are financially fragile because they are now dependent on a “complex web of unpredictable, short term, targeted project funding that may unravel at anytime.” (Clutterbuck & Howarth, 2008, p. 38). The Canadian Council on Social Development’s 2003 report, *Funding Matters*, also identified trends in funding that are cause for concern. There has been a move towards a targeted funding approach, which provides money to specific programs or services that address a narrow social problem (i.e. obesity, smoking, literacy, poverty). This approach moves money away from core funding and as a result, it only funds administrative costs that can be directly tied to the program or project. Consequently, funding is provided for shorter periods of times and on the whim of funding agencies, not necessarily when the social problem is alleviated. All of these trends add to a climate of instability and inconsistency in community programming.

The Social Planning Council of Ottawa (2005) has noted that this lack of stable funding is creating a sector that is becoming increasingly vulnerable and forcing organizations to spend their time preparing grant proposals in hopes of receiving limited short term funding. This ultimately is leading to insecurity amongst employees and greater turn-over in the workforce. They concluded that “longer term funding would encourage stability” (Social Planning Council of Ottawa, 2005, p. 24).

A challenge also identified by Clutterbuck and Howarth (2008), and confirmed through this research process, is that organizations are not receiving sufficient

administrative funding. Oftentimes funding comes with stipulations to be used only towards direct program operating costs and for many agencies, administrative time and costs are given “in kind.” This lack of administrative resources leads to bare bones record-keeping and outcome measurement. It was clear at the YMCA, for example, that there were not appropriate resources to maintain accurate records and registration forms for all participants, or the person power to enter these registrations into a centralized database. This led to difficulty following up with previous participants or even understanding where and when participants were involved in the program.

In addition, with such reliance on temporary funding for programs, agencies have little ability to employ and maintain a full time administrative workforce. This lack of consistency and leadership fails to provide families with a permanent main contact to the program or a long term relationship that can be maintained for long term follow up. As recognized by Clutterbuck and Howarth (2008) in their report on the current conditions of Ontario’s non-profit community services sector, there is currently an underinvestment in funding agency administrative systems: “most available funding no longer covers core organizational costs that are necessary to effectively operate an agency” (p. 40). There is “also no understanding (or room on cash flow reports) for activities staying connected to clients” (Scott, 2003, p. 14), creating even further challenges for those interested in following up with long term impacts. Consequently, maintaining appropriate administrative records and conducting research on participation benefits often comes up short.

This instability and inconsistency in the field of community recreation and after school programs just continues to “add more of the same” for children and families who



already face so much instability in their lives and communities. It is imperative therefore, in order to build trust to engage the most vulnerable of families, that programs are able to be sustainable and constant. Funders must move away from investing in bare bones and short term programs, and dedicate money into long term, sustainable programs for marginalized children. This means moving away from short term priorities or fads set by governments and back towards guaranteed funding for most important protective factor needed to overcome risks: relationships!

If we established relationship-building as the basis from which to make decisions, we would then see an immediate shift in the field of after school funding. Funding would be provided based on the agencies closest to the communities for the long term. Agencies would be able to develop and deliver programs that meet the needs of the community, rather than meeting the priorities of funders. As mentioned by Scott (2003):

Funders pay the bills, but nonprofit and voluntary organizations are closer to their communities and pride themselves on keeping in touch with community needs.

An organization that can no longer fulfill its primary mission risks losing credibility with clients and with the community” (p. 13)

Agencies with long term funding can also move administrative hours away from constant grant writing and reporting and towards increased research and greater support and follow up with families. Staff selection, training, and scheduling would reflect consistency, proper pay, and stability, to encourage staff to be involved with the same program in the same community for years. Children and families would be provided with the opportunity to attend a program that is trustworthy, stable, and with leaders who are recognizable and able to maintain relationships over the long term. Relationship-building,

therefore needs to be of equal or greater importance than multiple, short term programs for marginalized communities. We can't risk waiting for trends to change, we must do better now to increase stability and consistency in community programs.

But this is not isolated to the field of community recreation, and really how much impact can one recreation program have no matter how well designed or funded? Especially considering marginalized families are surrounded by poverty and several other barriers to healthy living? More of the community needs to be involved in the change and support process, providing families a seamless link from one service to another.

This collaboration was one of the keys to the Virtual YMCA's success, according to the principal. In this study, the school was able to help the organization identify potential program participants and use its relationship with families to encourage them to get involved with the program. It also helped that the program occurred at the same, familiar location. Similar linkages within schools have been used for other community programs, such as community gardens, clothing closets, bike drives, breakfast programs, health providers, and sports programs (Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2003). Partnerships with school boards, health care, and other agencies that follow children and families for the through childhood could be formed to support families and children over a period of years, rather than just months. Instead of constant applications and justification for subsidized services, families can just be invited into programs that are appropriate for them through referrals, collaboration, and community networking.

#### *Looking Towards the Future*

There was much to be learned from the voices and stories of the former participants. Their thoughts, dreams, emotions, and stories give us a small glimpse into

ways that program participation can continue to influence their wellbeing and development today. Through further research aimed to extend on these findings and address limitations in this study, we can begin to truly understand lasting meaning and significance for all former participants.

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**APPENDIX A – YMCA Approval Letter**

**Letter of Permission**

January 1, 2011

**Re: Permission to Conduct Research**

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To whom it may concern,

The principal investigator, Laura Kerr, has permission to conduct research on the Virtual YMCA program at Dr. Davey School operated by the YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington/Brantford until June 2011. It is understood that this research may be carried out on the YMCA or Dr. Davey School's property, with the intent to interview previous students and school teachers. The investigator is permitted to access previous registration forms to identify potential students who may be appropriate for the study.

## APPENDIX B – SCHOOL BOARD APPROVAL

**E-BEST****Evidence-  
Based  
Education  
& Services  
Team**Maple Lane  
Learning Centre20 Miller Drive  
Ancaster, ON  
L9G 2J1**Telephone:**  
905-304-8722  
Ext. 204**Fax:**  
905-304-9197**Email:**  
[ebest@hwdsb.on.ca](mailto:ebest@hwdsb.on.ca)**passion.****precision.****proof.**Laura Kerr  
Brock UniversityJune 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011

Dear Laura:

I am pleased to inform you that your research project, "Building Strong Kids: A mixed methods evaluation of the long term impacts and meaning of the virtual YMCA after school program", has received approval from senior administration of the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board. Leah Schwenger, the current Principal at Dr. J. Edgar Davey, has also approved the project. Please note that a new Principal will be at Dr. Davey in September 2011. The families and Teachers will make the final decision as to whether or not they will be involved in your research project. Please contact me if you encounter any difficulties with your project or if you make any changes to your research protocol.

**Conditional Approval Period\*\*:** June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011 – October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011

\*\* Full approval will be granted once copy of researcher's vulnerable sector record check has been received.

Upon completion of your study, kindly forward a final report of the study findings to the E-BEST office as well as the participating schools. Your final report will allow us to share the research initiatives and findings with interested HWDSB staff and school community. The report will also assist E-BEST in tracking the variety of studies that are completed within the HWDSB.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me.

Kind Regards,

Dana Liebermann-Finestone, Ph.D.  
Research Officer, Evidence-Based Education and Services Team  
Hamilton-Wentworth District School BoardTelephone: 905-304-8722, x 216  
Fax: 905-304-9197Email: [dana.liebermann@hwdsb.on.ca](mailto:dana.liebermann@hwdsb.on.ca)



## APPENDIX C – BROCK UNIVERSITY APPROVAL



Brock University  
Research Ethics Board  
Tel: 905-688-5550 ext. 3035  
Email: reb@brocku.ca

## Certificate of Ethics Clearance for Human Participant Research

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DATE: April 19, 2011

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: SHARPE Erin – Recreation and Leisure Studies

FILE: 10-201 - SHARPE

TYPE: Masters Thesis/Project STUDENT: Laura Kerr  
SUPERVISOR: Erin Sharpe

TITLE: Building Strong Kids: A Mixed Methods Evaluation of the Long Term Impacts and Meaning of the Virtual YMCA After School Program

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**ETHICS CLEARANCE GRANTED**

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Type of Clearance: MODIFICATION Expiry Date: 3/30/2012

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The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above named research proposal and considers the procedures, as described by the applicant, to conform to the University's ethical standards and the Tri-Council Policy Statement. Clearance granted from **4/19/2011** to **3/30/2012**.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored by, at a minimum, an annual report. Should your project extend beyond the expiry date, you are required to submit a Renewal form before **3/30/2012**. Continued clearance is contingent on timely submission of reports.

To comply with the Tri-Council Policy Statement, you must also submit a final report upon completion of your project. All report forms can be found on the Research Ethics web page.

In addition, throughout your research, you must report promptly to the REB:

- a) Changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the study;
- b) All adverse and/or unanticipated experiences or events that may have real or potential unfavourable implications for participants;
- c) New information that may adversely affect the safety of the participants or the conduct of the study;
- d) Any changes in your source of funding or new funding to a previously unfunded project.

We wish you success with your research.

Approved:

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Michelle McGinn, Chair  
Research Ethics Board (REB)

**Note:** Brock University is accountable for the research carried out in its own jurisdiction or under its auspices and may refuse certain research even though the REB has found it ethically acceptable.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of research at that site.

**APPENDIX D – VERBAL SCRIPT TO INTRODUCE STUDY TO PARENTS AND PARTICIPANTS***Verbal Script to Introduce the Study to Parents*

Hello (parent's name), my name is Laura Kerr, I am a manager with the YMCA, as well as a student at Brock University. I am currently doing a research project for school that is trying to follow up with previous participants of the Virtual YMCA program.

The purpose of this research project is to find out about what your child's experience was like at the Virtual YMCA and if it has helped them now that they have been out of the program for a couple years. Having your child participate in this project would involve a couple things:

1. I would have an interview with them that would last approximately one hour where I would like to hear their stories and talk to them about their participation in the Virtual YMCA;
2. I would access some of their school information, including test scores and attendance; and,
3. I would talk to their current teacher to see how they are doing in the classroom.

As a thank you for meeting with me, your child will receive a \$20 gift card to Jackson Square, your family will receive a \$20 gift card to Food Basics, and your child will be entered into a draw for a new computer. Once I complete all ten interviews, I will also be entering all students into a draw for a new computer!

Everything I find out will not be shared with anyone else and their name will not be used in any reports that may be created or stories that may be told to others. I will also want to record our interview, but these tapes will be destroyed after I have a chance to write everything down.

Students eligible for this study include those who have participated in the Virtual YMCA for at least one school year, has been out of the program for at least one full year, and still currently attend Dr. Davey School.

In order to move forward, I will need you to complete a permission form. Once that is received, I will set up an interview time with your son/daughter and their permission will be received. Would you like me to mail or drop off the permission form and more information on the study for you to review and discuss with your child?

*Verbal Script to Introduce the Study and Invite Students to Participate*

I would like to talk to you about a research project I am doing for school that is trying to follow up with previous participants of the Virtual YMCA program. What do you think a research project is?

The purpose of this research project is to find out what your experience was like at the Virtual YMCA and what you see as its impact and significance now that you have been out of the program for a couple of years. If you would like to be a part of the project, it would involve a couple things. We would have an interview together that would last approximately an hour where I would like to hear your stories and talk to you about your participation in the Virtual YMCA. I would also access some of your school information, including test scores and attendance, and I would talk to your current teacher to learn more about how you are doing in the classroom. Everything I find out will not be shared with anyone else and your names will not be used in any reports that may be created or stories that may be told to others. I will also want to record our interview, but these tapes will be destroyed after I have a chance to write everything down.

If you choose to participate, you will receive a gift card as a thank-you from me. You will also be entered into a draw for a brand new computer. By participating, you will also have a chance to voice your opinion and help me find out what the Virtual YMCA means to people who used to participate. Your ideas can really help benefit the program and make changes for future students.

If you are interested, I have given you two forms to be completed. The first is a participant assent where you give your permission to participate in the study (*read through this form*), and the second is a permission form for your parents since you are underage. Please take some time to decide if you would like to participate in the study and remember that your participation is voluntary. This means if you choose not to participate, no one will be upset or treat you differently and I will still be able to complete my research project.

If you would like to participate, please return both forms to Mrs. Schwenger in the next week. Do you think that is enough time? Do you have any questions for me?

**APPENDIX E – LETTER OF INVITATION AND PARENTAL CONSENT**

Dear Parent/Guardian of \_\_\_\_\_:

**Your child is eligible to participate in a research project with a chance to win a new computer!**

In order to proceed, your consent is required for your child to participate since your child is younger than eighteen. Your child will also need to give their permission in order to participate.

***WHY AM I DOING THIS STUDY?***

This study is looking at the long term impact and significance of participation in the Virtual YMCA program. **I'd like to know your child's experiences when they participated in the Virtual YMCA program** and how it may be influencing him or her today. I am completing this study as part of my Master's degree at Brock University under the supervision of Dr. Erin Sharpe. Students eligible for this study include those who have participated in the Virtual YMCA for at least one school year, has been out of the program for at least one full year, and still currently attend Dr. Davey School.

***WHAT DOES THIS STUDY INVOLVE?***

If your child is involved in the study, I would meet face to face for an interview with them and ask them some questions so they can describe their previous experience in the Virtual YMCA. This interview should last approximately one hour. The interview will also be recorded so that I can remember everything they say. Your child's real name will not be used in any reports so that no one will know what they have told me.

As a thank you for participating in the study, **your child will receive a \$20 gift card, your family will receive a \$20 gift card, and your child will entered into a draw to win a free computer.**

I will also be speak with your child's current teacher to ask questions about your child in their classroom and collecting some information from the school, including attendance records, reading diagnostic results, and EQAO test results. You will have the option to specify if you would like your child to participate in only the interview and not have this data collected.

***ARE THERE ANY RISKS FOR YOUR CHILD PARTICIPATING?***

There are some potential risks that you should be aware of. Some people may get upset or uncomfortable when talking about their past experiences, especially if they have had a negative experience in the program. If this happens, your child can stop the interview at any time. Taking part in this project is strictly voluntary so your child does not have to talk about anything they do not want to.

***WHO WILL KNOW YOUR CHILD IS IN THE STUDY?***

I will not tell anyone that your child is participating in the study except for their classroom teacher. I will not let anyone other than my professor see their answers or any personal information about your child. The only time I will have to break this promise is if I think your child might be in danger, for example, if I think that they are being abused or neglected, I will have to report it.

***DOES YOUR CHILD HAVE TO BE IN THE STUDY?***

Taking part in this project is **completely voluntary** and up to you and your child. No one will get angry or upset if you or your child says no. If you say yes, you can always change your mind later if you do not want the research to continue. Your child will still get a small gift from me for their time.

I look forward to speaking with your child in the future. If you have any questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me. You may reach me by e-mail at [laura.mcmahon@brocku.ca](mailto:laura.mcmahon@brocku.ca) or at home at 289-396-1774. You may also direct any questions to my faculty supervisor, Dr. Erin Sharpe, by telephone at 905-688-5550 ext. 3989 or by e-mail at [erin.sharpe@brocku.ca](mailto:erin.sharpe@brocku.ca). This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance from the Brock University Research Ethics Board (REB) (File #10-201) and permission from the YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington/Brantford. Any concerns about your involvement may also be directed to the REB in the Office of Research Services at 905-688-5550, ext. 3035, or by e-mail at [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca).

Thank you for your time and consideration. If you give permission for your child to participate, please return the next page in the sealed envelope enclosed to Mrs. Schwenger at Dr. Davey School as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Laura Kerr

Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, Brock University

Director of Day Camping, YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington/Brantford

Erin Sharpe, PhD

Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, Brock University

To give permission for your child to participate in the study, please complete the permission form below and return to the principal of Dr. Davey School in the enclosed sealed envelope (or you may contact Laura Kerr directly to pick up the form).

**Parent Permission Form**

Child's name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Do you give permission for your child to participate in an interview with Laura Kerr?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Do you agree to have your child's interview(s) recorded?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Do you give me permission to speak with your child's teacher about your child?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Do you give me permission to collect some school data on your child?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Laura Kerr at Brock University, under the supervision of Dr. Erin Sharpe. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted. I acknowledge that all information gathered on this project will be used for research purposes only. I am aware that permission may be withdrawn at any time (by either the parent and/or youth) without penalty by advising the researcher. I also agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any thesis or publication that comes of this research, with the understanding that all quotations will not include your child's name.

Parent Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX F – PARTICIPANT ASSENT****Participant Assent**

[On Brock University letterhead]

Dear (*participant's name*):

I'd like to invite you to take part in a project that I'm working on with my professor at Brock University to understand your previous experience with the Virtual YMCA program. I'm going to spend a few minutes telling you about the project, and then ask you if you're interested in taking part in the project.

***Why am I doing this study?***

I'd like to know your experiences of this program and how it may have influenced you today.

***What does the study involve?***

If you decide to take part in this study, we would meet face to face for an interview and I would ask you some questions so you can describe your previous experience in the Virtual YMCA. This interview should last approximately half an hour. The interview will also be recorded so that I can remember everything you say – however, if you don't wish to be recorded, we can still do the interview without the recording. There are no right or wrong answers, and when I finish all the interviews I will be writing up the experiences like a story to help explain the long term meaning of participating in the Virtual YMCA program. Your real name will not be used in any reports so that no one will know what you have told me.

I will also be speaking with your current teacher to ask questions about you in their classroom and collecting some information on your school performance, including some of your test results and attendance at school.

***Are there any risks associated with your participation?***

There are some potential risks that you should be aware of. Some people may get upset or uncomfortable when talking about their past experiences, especially if you have had a negative experience in the program. If this happens, you can stop the interview at any time. Taking part in this project is strictly voluntary so you do not have to talk about anything you do not want to. Just let me know when something is bothering you and we can either stop the interview or move on to another topic.

***Who will know that you are in the study?***

I will not tell anyone that you are participating in the study except for your school principal and classroom teacher. We will try to schedule the interviews so that your absence is not questioned and I will not let anyone other than my professor see your answers or any personal information about you. The only time I will have to break this

promise is if I think you or someone else might be in danger and I will talk to you first before I say anything. For example, if I think that you are being abused or neglected, I will have to report it.

***Do you have to be in the study?***

Taking part in this project is completely your choice. No one will get angry or upset with you if you say no. No one will treat you any differently if you say no. If you say yes, you can always change your mind later if you do not want to continue. Just let me know if you have had enough and want to quit the project. I won't ask any questions and I will respect your decision. You will still get a small gift from me for your time.

Thanks for your time,

Laura Kerr

**Child Assent Form**

Youth's name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Do you want to participate in this study?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Do you agree to have your interview(s) recorded?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Do you agree to have me speak with your teacher and collect some school data for you?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Child Signature: \_\_\_\_\_



**APPENDIX G – INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR STUDENTS****A. Background Information**

*Thank you for meeting with me so I can ask you some questions. First, I am going to ask you some questions to understand a little more about you and your participation in the Virtual YMCA.*

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What grade are you in?
3. Who is your current teacher? Do you like your teacher? Who's the best teacher you have ever had?
4. How many years have you been at Dr. Davey School?
  - a. How many other schools have you been to? Have you always lived in Hamilton? In your current house? Who do you live with and has it always been that way?
  - b. Is school important to you?
5. How did you come to be a participant in the Virtual YMCA?
  - a. How many years did you attend?
  - b. Why did you decide to participate?
  - c. Was it important for you to attend on your scheduled days?
6. Why did you stop going to the Virtual YMCA?
7. What three words best describe you?
8. What do you want to be when you grow up?
9. Where do you live? Have you always lived there? What sort of things are in your neighbourhood?
  - a. Do you have a lot of friends who live around you? What do you do with them?
  - b. Is your neighbourhood important to you?
  - c. Who do you live with? Any other important people in your family?
  - d. What sort of things do you like to do with your family?
10. Have you participated in other organized programs other than the VY? Tell me about those.
11. What would you typically do after school on days when you didn't go to the VY?

**B. Meaning and significance of Virtual YMCA participation**

What is the significance and meaning of participation in the Virtual YMCA program for former participants?

*I am trying to understand what it meant, and still means to you, to participate in the Virtual YMCA. I am interested in your thoughts, feelings, and opinions about your previous participation in the program. I want you to think back to when you were an active participant and try to remember the other children, the staff, the activities, and the overall program as you were experiencing it.*

12. What do you remember about the Virtual YMCA program?
  - a. Why does that stand out for you?
  - b. Can you tell me a story about your experience there?
  - c. If you had to describe the Virtual YMCA program to somebody, what would you say?
13. What do you remember about the leaders at the Virtual YMCA?
  - a. Why does that/they stand out for you?
  - b. Describe the kind of relationship you had with the leaders in the program.
14. Describe what you remember about your relationship with the other children in the program.
15. How did you feel when you were at the Virtual YMCA? Is that different than how you feel in the classroom? At home? Other organized activities?
16. What was your favourite part about the Virtual YMCA?
  - a. Do you still enjoy doing “that” now?
17. What was your least favourite part of the Virtual YMCA?
18. What did this program mean to you?
  - a. Was it important in your life? Why?
  - b. Was it important for you to attend on your scheduled days? Why?
19. Do you think when you are a teenage in high school you will still remember the VY? What will you remember the most?

**APPENDIX I – LETTER OF INVITATION AND CONSENT FOR PRINCIPAL**

[on brock University letterhead]

[to appear on Brock University letterhead]

Dear (*principal's name*),

This letter is to invite you to participate in a research study that I am conducting as part of my Master's degree at Brock University under the supervision of Dr. Erin Sharpe. Students in your school have agreed to participate in this study, and your participation will help gain additional data on the students in question.

***Why am I doing this study?***

I am trying to investigate the long term impacts for students who have previously participated in the Virtual YMCA program.

***What does the study involve?***

Ideally ten students who have previously participated in the Virtual YMCA program will be interviewed to investigate their experience in the Virtual YMCA program and if any behaviours or skills learned are still present in the student's life. In addition to the interview with the student, additional data will be collected from their current classroom teacher on their present social and academic behaviours and from the school on their test scores and attendance compared to their peers.

The interview is anticipated to last one and a half hours and will be recorded for further transcription.

***Are there any risks associated with your participation?***

There are some potential risks that you should be aware of. Some people may get upset or uncomfortable when talking about their feelings or opinions. If this happens, you can stop the interview at any time. Taking part in this project is strictly voluntary and you do not have to talk about anything they do not want to.

I look forward to speaking with you in the future. If you have any questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me. You may reach me by e-mail at [laura.mcmahon@brocku.ca](mailto:laura.mcmahon@brocku.ca). You may also direct any questions to my faculty supervisor, Erin Sharpe, by telephone at 905-688-5550 ext. 3989, or by e-mail at [erin.sharpe@brocku.ca](mailto:erin.sharpe@brocku.ca). This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance from the Research Ethics Board (REB) (File #) and Hamilton/Wentworth District School Board. Any concerns about your involvement may also be directed to the REB in the Office of Research Services at 905-688-5550, ext. 3035, or by e-mail at [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca).

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Laura Kerr  
Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies  
Brock University

Erin Sharpe, PhD  
Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies  
Brock University

**Permission Form**

Name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Do you give permission to participate in a voluntary interview with Laura Kerr?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Do you agree to have your interview(s) recorded?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Laura Kerr at Brock University, under the supervision of Dr. Erin Sharpe. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted. I acknowledge that all information gathered on this project will be used for research purposes only. I am aware that permission may be withdrawn at any time (by either the parent and/or youth) without penalty by advising the researcher. I also agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any thesis or publication that comes of this research, with the understanding that all quotations will not include your child's name.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX J – PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW GUIDE**

1. Can you describe the neighbourhood where your school was located? What is the typical family structure and demographics of the neighbourhood?
2. Can you describe your school, its culture, and the children attending your school?
3. How is your school viewed by the school board and teachers?
4. What are the biggest needs for this community? Why is it considered at risk?
5. How did the Virtual YMCA start at your school?
6. Has the program had any significance for your school? What did it mean to your school to have the program there?
7. Have there been other after school programs to run at your school?
8. Do programs have a different meaning or significance if they are present for a long time in the school?
9. Did you notice any changes in the children who attended the program as opposed to children who didn't?
10. (talk about each individual child who was interviewed) Who is the child and their family? Are they a typical student? Would you still consider them at risk?